DORA MYRL
THE LADY DETECTIVE

McD. BODKIN Q.C.

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OPINIONS OF THE PRESS

ON

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By M. McD. BODKIN, Q.C.

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DORA MYRL

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DORA MYRL

THE LADY DETECTIVE

BY

M. McD. BODKIN, Q.C.

AUTHOR OF 'PAUL BECK, THE RULE-OF-THUMB DETECTIVE'

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1900

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DORA MYRL

I

THE FALSE HEIR AND TRUE

'It is impossible,' said Roderick Aylmer to himself, looking out through the great bow-window that bulged from the front of Duncombe House on the wide gravel sweep, as a bicycle with swift smooth curve glided into view, and a dainty little lady leaping from the machine went up the broad stone steps as lightly as a bird.

'That schoolgirl a Cambridge wrangler and a Doctor of Medicine! It's too absurd,' Roderick Alymer murmured, more and more amazed.

There was certainly nothing of the New Woman, or for that matter of the old, about the winsome figure that stood at the top of the great stone steps, all alive and alert, preening

herself like a bird in the sunshine. A pleased face and a pleasant she showed ; the face of a bright schoolgirl out for a holiday, brimming over with excitement. An audacious toque, with a brace of scarlet feathers stuck in it, was perched amongst thick coiled hair that had the ripple and lustre of a brown trout stream in the sunshine. The short skirt of her tailor-made dress twitched by the light wind showed slim ankles and neat feet cased in tan cycling-shoes.

She passed under the Doric pillars and porch of the entrance, and the electric bell tinkled.

'For Mr. Aylmer,' she said to the big footman who swung the door open, and she put a visiting card into his hand with the name 'Miss Dora Myrl.'

Down the broad stairs and square cool hall with its chessboard pavement of white and black marble, came Mr. Roderick Aylmer himself with outstretched hand.

'You are very welcome,' he said. She peered up for a moment with keen bird-like look into the honest handsome face, then she put her little hand with frank firm clasp in his big one.

'I have already written to you, Miss Myrl,' he began abruptly when they were together in the drawing-room, 'my wife is very ill and worn to a shadow, though the doctors can make nothing of her illness. She had a bad fever when our only boy was born twelve years ago, and she has never quite recovered. Most gentle always: too gentle I often think; she is never angry, never smiles. Though she loves our boy with her whole heart, she seems saddest when he is with her. Her melancholy grows deeper day by day. It was good of you to come, for we are very dull here. If you can take her out of herself and cheer her up a little, I will be for ever grateful. Pardon me for a moment; I'll tell her you are here, she will be delighted.'

But the first glance at the handsome shadowy pale-faced woman that came slowly into the room leaning on her husband's arm, told Dora Myrl that her hostess was not delighted to see her, but frightened; though she hid her fright in the welcome of a gracious lady.

With a single glance the keen-eyed little woman divined a hidden fear in that sad face, and her pity took practical shape in the thought: 'I will win her confidence and help her if I can.'

A fortnight went swiftly by in Dunscombe House. To the anxious master there was new life in the companionship of the gay little lady, who tested his skill to the utmost at tennis or croquet on the smooth green lawn framed by high unbroken walls of darker verdure, or at billiards in the great cool oak-panelled room that absorbed the glow of the electric lights.

To the gentle sad-eyed lady she was a not less congenial companion. A sympathy went out from her, even when they sat in silence, that was comforting to the sorely tried heart. In every word and act there was cheerfulness and comfort, and willingness to help. But their long talks together, though they often lapsed into affectionate endearments, and more than once, as Dora instinctively felt, came close to the hidden trouble, had not touched it yet.

The two women sat together through one hot noon in Alice Aylmer's boudoir, whose windows looked out on green shade and sparkling water. Though one read, and the other worked in silence at some vague embroidery which was an excuse for idleness, there was a pleasant sense of companionship between them.

While her eyes gathered the letters and

words of her book and the main trend of the story, Dora's curious restless thoughts were busy with the secret which she vaguely felt like a pressure in the silent room.

'Confidence begets confidence,' she thought. 'I will speak to her about myself.'

'Would you care at all to hear, Alice,' she began abruptly, 'what I was and what I did before I came here?'

'If you care to tell me, dear; if not, it is enough for me that you came here and that you are my friend.'

'I think friends should have no secrets,' with a quick flash of the bright grey eyes. 'Yet now that I come to think of it there is very little to tell. My father was an old-fashioned Cambridge don who married late in life. My mother'—the clear voice faltered and the bright eyes dimmed—'I never saw. She gave her life for mine. My father grieved at first that I was not a boy. Afterwards, I think, he liked me better as I was. It was his whole ambition that I should be a lady and a scholar. He waited in this world three months beyond his time, so the doctors said, to see me a Cambridge Wrangler; then he died content, leaving me alone at the age of eighteen with

two hundred pounds and my wranglership for a fortune. I had no taste for the humdrum life of school-teaching, so I spent the little money I had in making myself a doctor. But practice didn't come, and I couldn't and wouldn't wait for it. Within the last year I have been a telegraph girl, a telephone girl, a lady journalist. I liked the last best. But I have not found my vocation yet, for I am an impatient little busybody, brimful of restless curiosity.

'Your husband's advertisement in the paper caught me. There was something queer about the demand for a "lively companion" that appealed to my curiosity, so I threw up my other work and came on here.'

'And I hope you are glad you came?'

'Very glad, but——'

A sharp knock cut her answer off short in the middle.

'Mrs. Caruth,' said the maid at the door.

'Tell her to come up.'

But the words were hardly spoken when Mrs. Caruth herself pushed rudely past the servant into the room.

A squarely built woman was Mrs. Caruth, with dark eyes that flashed under cleanly curved eyebrows, and a very resolute mouth and chin;

a strong face, almost a handsome, but the face of a woman to be feared, not trusted. So thought quick-eyed Dora Myrl as she glanced from Mrs. Caruth to Mrs. Alymer, who flushed and grew pale again, and quivered like a leaf in the wind at the sight of the intruder. Dora saw her colour come and go and her limbs tremble, and like a skilled physician searching a patient's body with a stethescope when he finds the lurking disease at last, she murmured to herself, 'The trouble is here.'

Meanwhile Mrs. Caruth looked with steady insolence at Dora for a moment or two, with a look which said as plainly as look could, 'What business have you here?'

Subborn Dora would have rebelled against the woman's insolence, but there was a meek entreaty in Mrs. Aylmer's eyes that quite subdued her.

'I have some letters to write, Alice, if you don't mind,' she said.

As she stepped quickly from the room, she heard the door closed sharply behind her and the key turned in the lock.

For nearly an hour Dora waited. She could hear from time to time through the closed door the tones of an angry dominating voice and the noise of weeping.

At last Mrs. Caruth came out with a look of triumph on her evil face, and passed through without a glance where Dora sat. In the inner room Mrs. Aylmer was lying full length on a sofa, her face buried in a velvet cushion, her whole body shaken by a storm of sobs.

It was part of the girl's nature—a vice in her nature if you will—that the warm womanly sympathy she felt for the frail sufferer was shot through by the quick thought, 'Now is the time to surprise her secret.'

She sat down beside the sofa and took the limp hand that hung over in both of hers.

'Tell me all about it, Alice.'

She spoke as one speaks to a child, gently yet with authority not to be resisted, and Alice Aylmer, her will enfeebled by grief and fear, answered submissively as a child.

'It was when my boy was born,' she began.

'The boy that is coming home for his holidays to-morrow?'

'Yes—no—oh my God! have a little patience with me, Dora, and I will tell you everything. Don't speak to me or I shall break down. We had been three years married and we were ever so happy, but all

the same I could see my husband was just longing for an heir.

'There were great rejoicings when the boy came at last. But not for long. I was very weak, and my poor baby weaker and frailer still; I could not nurse my firstborn. Oh! you don't know, Dora, what it is to have your baby come to you with groping little hands and parted lips for food, and send it away empty. Mrs. Caruth had been my maid, but she had married the blacksmith in the village—a drunkard as I heard afterwards—and had a boy of her own the same day that mine was born, so she came and took charge of my Archie. It made me mad to see the pale puny little scrap that never came to me without whining, lie so placidly at her bosom.

'We both grew weaker—baby and I—day by day; I on my baby's account I do believe. One evening I had fallen into a deep sleep, and when I awoke the room was quite dark, but I could hear the voices of my husband and the doctor talking under their breath.

'"There is no danger of *her*," I heard the doctor say, and his voice dwelt on the word "her" in a way that made my very heart grow cold. I guessed what was coming.

'"But the boy, doctor?" I heard my husband say softly. It was the question I was longing to ask.

'"Are you strong enough to bear the answer?" the doctor said.

'"I am strong enough for anything. Anything is better than this fear."

'"Then have done with hope and fear," the doctor answered solemnly. "The boy cannot live."

'"These are cruel words, doctor."

'"They are the cruel truth."

'Oh! my poor husband! A low groan of utter agony broke from his lips. My heart bled for him and I would have cried out, but I heard the doctor's voice whisper "Have courage, man, you will waken her," and they both passed softly out together. They did not know, I think, that Mrs. Caruth was in the room. But when the door closed after them, she lit a candle and came quietly to my bedside and looked me in the face.

'"You heard them," she said. "Your breathing stopped and I knew you heard them."

'"Oh! Martha, it will kill him," was all I could get out, "it will kill my husband."

'"You wish to save him this trouble?"

'"I would give my life; I would give my soul to save him, but there is no way."

'"There is a way; listen quietly till I have my say out whatever you think at first. We must change the babies."'

'"Oh! I could never do it,"' I cried.

'"Listen," she spoke fiercely. "Mine is a splendid boy worth a hundred of your puny things. You will gain by the swop. Your baby will have all the better chance of life with me who can nurse it. If it lives we can change back again. If it dies—don't shiver like that—you have got to bear it. If it dies your husband will never know, and he will still have a fine handsome heir."

'I was very weak and she was very strong; is that an excuse for me, I wonder? I agreed to part with my boy for my husband's sake, and gave her money and jewels and swore her to be good to him.

'"I will love him as my own," she said over and over again.

'I think I must have been a little light-headed after that, for I kept crying and moaning all day that my child would die. I had a very kind nurse, Dora, Kitty Sullivan was her name, and I think she was an Irishwoman. I know

she was a Roman Catholic. She tried hard to comfort me, and she knelt down by the cradle and prayed fervently for the child. I could hear the words "Hail Mary, Holy Mary," over and over again, till at last I fell off to a kind of doze, but my fear and sorrow never left me even in my sleep.

'Nurse Sullivan went away that evening. Mrs. Caruth was to mind me till the new nurse arrived. She came into the dim room that night with a bundle under her cloak and knelt down beside the cradle, and I did not look, but I knew she was changing the clothes on the two children.

'As she stepped out like a dark shadow through the door, there was a child's cry in the room as though my baby was crying to me to save him. It went to my heart like a knife. I felt all my life as it were slipping away from me. I thought I was dying and I was horribly frightened of death.

'It was nearly a month; so I was told; before I came back to consciousness life again.

'There was light in the room, and my husband and the doctor were looking down on me.

'"She will do now," the doctor said, "I

always thought she would do, but the boy's life is a miracle."

'They brought the baby to my bed, bright and rosy, and I gloried in him.

'Can you believe it, Dora, I had forgotten all about Nurse Caruth and her wicked plan. I thought the child was my own. What folly they talk of a mother's instinct! That wicked woman's baby twined itself into the very fibres of my heart. When memory came slowly back to me, though the knowledge almost broke my heart, but it did not lessen my love.

'I heard that Mrs. Caruth had disappeared, leaving no trace behind her. But in about two years time she returned to the village, bringing a boy back with her; my boy; Roderick's boy; the rightful heir of Dunscombe, whom I had robbed of his rights. I have been miserable ever since. I feel I am an unnatural hearted mother, but I could not and I cannot give up the boy I love for my own that I do not love.

'Mrs. Caruth was well content. I gave her money from time to time, and she wanted nothing more. But the boy; my poor wretched boy; fell into evil habits. To-day she came to say he had been caught thieving and had been

sent to prison, and that I must get his father to save him or she would tell everything.

'Oh! I am the most miserable woman in God's earth. What shall I do; what shall I do?'

'You must tell the truth.'

'I cannot; I dare not. It would kill Roderick to know his child was a thief. Oh! I know it is cruel and wicked of me to hate my own child and love another in its place. But I cannot help it. When you see Archie to-morrow you will understand and pity me.'

There was not long to wait.

Next day a dog cart drove from the railway station to the door, and a bright, curly-pated school boy bounded from it like a rubber ball and so up the steps into the arms of Alice Aylmer, who stood waiting for him, flushed and trembling.

'I nearly lost my "luck," mother,' he broke out before the hugging was half over. 'It fell from my chain on the platform and was near going down on the line. You keep it safe until I can have it fastened to my chain again.' He laid a small silver medal on the cabinet beside her.

'Yes, yes; I'll take care of it for you,' she answered. 'Now run away to your room.'

The joy faded from her face as he disappeared, and she turned a look of piteous appeal on Dora.

'What did he mean by his "luck"?' said Dora, evading the question in her eyes. She had taken up the lucky medal and was examining it keenly. It was much worn, but she could make out the figure of a woman crowned, with her hands at her sides, and around her specks that looked like stars.

'That's part of the story,' said Mrs. Aylmer. 'I found it tied tight round the baby's neck with a thin white ribbon. I had to cut the string to get it off. When I asked Mrs. Caruth she seemed confused and denied all knowledge of it at first. But after a while she said it was a lucky charm she had from a gipsy. I don't believe in such things of course, but still I thought it could do no harm to fasten it to the boy's watch-chain.'

'You have kept the string?' Dora interrupted with an eagerness that seemed quite out of proportion to the trivial question.

'Yes, I have kept the string,' Mrs Alymer answered, surprised.

'Can you show it to me?'

'Of course, dear.'

She unlocked a drawer in her cabinet, and from many relics of babyhood she drew out a faded strip of narrow white ribbon which had been tied in a hard knot to the narrow circlet of a baby's neck and cut close to the knot.

Dora Myrl almost snatched it from her hand and laid it on the table beside the boy's 'luck,' and eyed them both intently for a long minute.

Then the tension of eyes and lips relaxed, and she turned with a bright smile to Mrs. Aylmer.

'It's all right,' she said.

'But—what's all right, dear?' queried the other, startled, and trembling at some subtle meaning in her tone and smile.

'You see that ribbon has been tied only once and never untied?'

'That's plain enough, but—'

'Wait a bit; let me tell you what this gipsy charm is. It is a Roman Catholic medal in which they have great faith; no wonder it puzzled Mrs. Caruth!—'

'Oh! Dora, you frighten me; go on.'

'Have a little patience. You told me you had a Catholic nurse who left before the

children were changed, who prayed for your boy. She tied that medal round your child's neck and it never came off till you cut it off. Can you guess the good news now?'

'My own, own child?' The words broke from her in a half articulate cry.

'Your own child, of course, my dear,' Dora answered sedately. 'Your mother's love made no mistake. The plot is plain as daylight. Mrs. Caruth never changed the children's clothes nor the children. She knew nothing of the medal. She kept her own child, which she doubtless loved after her own fashion. But she deceived you into the belief that it was yours. Then whether yours lived or died she stood to profit by the fraud.'

Mrs. Aylmer listened with hope and joy shining in her eyes. At that moment Algie burst into the room rejoicing, with a cricket bat in one hand and a fishing rod in the other, and was amazed when his mother leaped on him with eager lips and arms and sent his playthings clashing to the floor, and pressed him closer and closer to her heart, kissing and fondling him and crying through her tears 'My own boy! At last, at last, my very own!'

Mrs. Caruth, calling next day to see Mrs. Aylmer, saw Miss Dora Myrl instead. Under the cross-examination of that astute young lady she completely broke down and confessed her fraud. She fled from the village in fear and trembling, and troubled Alice Aylmer's peace, no more.

'You are our good angel, Miss Myrl,' Roderick Aylmer said when the three sat together that evening, while in Alice Aylmer's eyes love and gratitude shone through happy tears, for she had confessed and been forgiven, and her heart was at rest.

'You are our good angel'—the man was desperately in earnest and his words tripped each other in his earnestness. 'You have given us back happiness. A heavy cloud hung over our home, and you are the sunshine that has dispelled it. You must let us show our gratitude by——'

But Dora cut him short with a gay laugh. 'Don't talk poetry, please,' she said. 'You can recommend me professionally to your friends if you like. I have found my vocation. I am about to send this card to the engraver at once.'

She had written some words on a scrap of paper while he was speaking. Now she set it before him and he read, in writing, clear, neat, and almost small as print, the words--

MISS DORA MYRL
Lady Detective.

II

THE HIDDEN VIOLIN

'I SHOULD like to, Sylvia, but I can't.'

'You must, Dora.'

'Must is a strong word, my dear, but it is on my side this time, not yours. There is a tough case there that insists on being finished to-morrow. I can't go.'

'But you will, whether you can or not.'

She whisked away with a rustling of silk to the other end of Dora Myrl's bright little sitting-room, where the two girls had been sitting in a cosy corner for a cosy cup of afternoon tea. Brightening her eyes and dimpling her cheeks, there was some pleasant surprise which she could hardly hold back.

Dora Myrl's eye followed her keenly.

'They call me a detective, Sylvia, when they want to flatter me. But I don't pretend to guess your conundrum. What is it? You

have got a stone up that new-fashioned silk sleeve. Take it out and throw it.'

Sylvia stood before her dramatically, her hands close to her sides, her blue eyes dancing with excitement.

'Signor Nicolo Amati is to play—there!'

Dora Myrl surrendered at discretion.

'I will go, of course,' she said, smilingly.

'Whether you can or not?'

'Whether I can or not.'

For here was a chance which no girl—and least of all a girl like Dora Myrl, full of vitality to her finger-tips—would miss.

All London—that is to say, literary and artistic London, or the London that thought itself, or wanted other people to think it, literary and artistic—was still brimming over with the story how that famous musical connoisseur, Lord Mellecent, travelling in Northern Italy with his daughter Sylvia, had lit, amid the embowering vines of a little village on the banks of the Po, on a miraculous violin and violinist. He very quickly convinced himself that the violin was the masterpiece of Antonio Stradivarius, and the player a direct descendant of Nicolo Amati, whose name he bore.

For ages this priceless violin had discoursed

exquisite music for the simple villagers. Its strings had danced at their weddings and wept at their graves in the hands of generation after generation of the gifted family of the Amati. But young Nicolo was declared, even by the lovers of old times, to be the most wonderful of them all. Beneath his flying fingers this wonderful violin made music more sweet than the song birds in spring-time, more sad than the moaning of the autumn winds.

Lord Mellecent was in a very frenzy of rapture. He loitered about the sunshiny village for a month, till at last he succeeded in carrying violin and violinist away with him to smoky London. It was vaguely hinted that his golden-haired, blue-eyed daughter, Sylvia, aided and abetted in the capture.

Nicolo Amati had known nothing of the science of music. The marvellous melody of which he was master had come to him from—if we may use the phrase—aural tradition alone. His soul was full of sweet sounds which he poured forth from his sympathetic violin as spontaneously as the nightingale. The masterpieces of the great composers were to him the entering on a new region of undreamt delights.

He had come to London in the spring, and London was thrown into a ferment of restless anticipation by the announcement that in the early autumn he would play for the first time in public.

That this public appearance was to be anticipated by a musical 'at home' at the house of Lord Mellecent was the exciting news that the Earl's daughter carried to Dora Myrl.

They were at school together, these two, when the three years' difference in their age seemed like an eternity. Dora, the brilliant leader of the school, alike in the playground and in the study, had been kind to the shy, golden-haired girl just arrived, and helped her and petted her into happiness. So a warm friendship had sprung up between the two.

For Sylvia, Dora was still and always 'the head girl.' The Earl's daughter looked up to the lady detective with a reverence tempered by affection. But of late the wonderful Italian had shared that homage, and they had many talks together about Signor Nicolo Amati. Dora was keenly anxious to see and hear him, on Sylvia's account and on her own, for she was passionately fond of music, and she wished

to judge for herself if the new idol was worthy of his incense.

'Of course I know he is incomparable,' said Sylvia, wisely, when they had settled down again after the first flurry of the news. 'I am one of the three people in London who have heard him. Papa and his old master are the other two. All the rest are dying of curiosity, just like yourself, Dora. Oh, don't deny it! You suspect my swan is a goose. There are only fifty people invited in all. I have been positively mobbed for cards. I have had to go about disguised for the last fortnight or I would never have escaped with my life.'

She was brimming over with delight and babbled incoherently.

'Monsieur Gallasseau is coming, too. You know him, of course. The second best violin player in the world; only he thinks himself the best. Won't it be fun when he finds out! Don't shake your head that way, you solemn old thing; you have not heard our Italian.'

'Your Italian, Sylvia?'

'I didn't say mine, and you must not snap up my words like that, or I'll take my card from you. Mind you come in good time. Now

I must be off.' And before the blush her friend's words had called up had left her fair face, she was out of the room.

There was a subdued excitement amongst the fortunate fifty that were gathered together in the great drawing-room of Lord Mellecent's house in Park Lane, and an impatience even of the dainties that were handed round on silver salvers by soft-footed servants.

Through the low buzz of conversation one name sounded persistently. Broken sentences could be heard here and there.

'I believe he's just wonderful.'

'The music of the spheres, my dear.'

'His violin is all carved out of one piece of wood, they tell me.'

'And he's so young and handsome!'

'They say that Lord Mellecent could never have coaxed him to come but for Sylvia, and that she is just simply——'

'But surely Lord Mellecent would never give his consent. He is too——'

'One can never be sure nowadays. Genius is so much the fashion it can go anywhere and do anything.'

Unconscious Sylvia, lovely in pure, soft white, with a bunch of blue ribbon at her throat,

sat with Dora Myrl in the front row, close to a daïs carpeted in dark red, with a music stand conspicuous in the centre. Her soft cheek was flushed to the wild-rose tint, and her blue eyes alight with eager expectancy.

A sudden hush came upon the people. All the eyes were on the daïs. A side door opened, and there appeared the Earl of Mellecent, with a man walking on either side, and half-a-dozen of the most noted musical connoisseurs in London following.

The famous Frenchman, Gallasseau, walked at the Earl's right hand—tall, broad, swarth, and smiling. But the young Italian on his left caught and held the eyes of the audience. His beauty would have in itself compelled attention apart from the subtle rumours of his genius. He had the figure of a Greek god, black eyes full of light and fire, and a face perfect in curve and colour.

There was a dead silence in the body of the room, and a little buzz of talk upon the daïs. The suave Frenchman blandly insisted that his young rival should take precedence, and after a moment's courteous contention Nicolo Amati came forward to the front of the platform.

A wonderful old violin, that glowed a rich,

dark, warm red in the taper's light, nestled lovingly at his chin. He held it with a clasp so light it was almost a caress.

In the moment's pause the people fidgeted in their seats in the intensity of expectation. The bow swept the strings, and all held their breath to listen.

Never was such music heard since Orpheus drew beasts and trees in his train, and charmed the heart of the grim King of Hades by the magic of his lute. "Sweet, sweet, blinding sweet," it filled all hearts with ecstasy that was almost pain. The melody flowed as life flows, with infinite variety. Love and grief and joy were wakened in their turn. Now the flying bow struck quick, clear notes from the strings like showers of many-coloured sparks; now the magic violin sighed or moaned or sung under the hands of the master. Its pores and fibres were filled with all the melody it had made and heard, and thrilled with sweet remembrance at his touch.

The music faded away in a long, dying fall that filled all eyes with idle tears. The silence rested for awhile in love with the sweet strains.

Applause broke out at last—softly, almost reverently, coming straight from the heart.

As Amati bowed, his dark eyes were lustrous with unshed tears.

'You know the famous Scotch test?' Dora whispered. 'A mon is a player when he can gar himsel' greet wi' his fiddle.'

Sylvia made no sign, spoke no word, but sat motionless with parted lips and shining eyes like one inspired.

Presently a low murmur arose in which the name of 'Gallasseau' was mingled, but there was no heartiness in the sound.

Monsieur Gallasseau was equal to the occasion.

'No, no,' he said, shrugging his broad shoulders higher at each 'no.' 'I will not break the charm. The vanquished salutes the victor,' he added, bowing smilingly, 'but you would not publicly drag me at your chariot wheels, *mon ami*? If the favour might be permitted I would willingly play with you alone and hear you play. But it is too much to ask?'

Before Lord Mellecent could interpose, Amati answered courteously, in good English, softened and made musical by the pure Italian vowels:

'Signor Gallasseau is too modest. But if

he will come to my rooms to-morrow at noon my violin and myself are at his service.'

The Frenchman bowed his thanks with a smile on his handsome face, in which there was no trace of envy.

Presently the company began to move and melt away softly, as if still under the spell of the music,

Sylvia whispered to Dora, 'Don't stir; he will be here for the evening, and will play for us again. I want you to know him well.'

'It is not I, signorina,' said Amati to Dora Myrl the same evening, when, almost faint with delight, she murmured her praise of his playing; 'it is not I, it is my violin. The music is here always, asleep till the touch of the bow awakens it.'

'A wonderful violin!' Lord Mellecent chimed in, settling himself in the saddle for an easy canter on his hobby. 'You know the story, of course?' to Dora, 'It is the masterpiece of Stradivarius—we have it under his own hand—and was a gift to his godson, the son of his master, "Nicolo Amati." For nearly two hundred years it has made music for the family of Amati, and it is to-day more lovely than when it came from the master's hand.

There is no violin in the world to match it. Look at the scroll; it is chiselled clean, and sharp, and fine. See how perfect is the purfling! Mark the elegant droop of the long corners. Above all, the varnish—the miraculous varnish of which the secret is lost to the world—pure dragon's blood, with a rich inward glow.'

He moved the violin softly in the light, and the smooth surface glowed like deep red wine. There was no chip or stain on the gem-like glow; only the under varnish of rich yellow showed through the worn surface of the fainter red where the touch of the players had been through all those years.

Dora, who knew something about violins as she knew something about most things worth knowing, recognised the supreme beauty of the noble instrument in whose heart was hidden such melody.

The music was in her ears and heart all through the night, and all next day its strains kept mingling with the thoughts she strove to concentrate on the details of the 'tough case' on which she was engaged.

There was a sudden sound of quick steps on the stairs, and, without knocking, Sylvia burst into the room.

Turning sharply on her office chair, that swung round with the motion of her body, Dora saw the handsome face of Amati appear behind the excited girl with a strange look in his dark eyes.

It was Sylvia spoke.

'You'll find it, won't you, Dora? I promised him you would. His violin, you know —it's lost, stolen, vanished, but you'll find it!'

'If I can,' said Dora quietly. Her lips tightened, and a curious light kindled at the back of her clear grey eyes. 'But first I must know all about the loss. Gently, Sylvia; sit down. Sit down, Signor Amati. Now tell me the story.'

Amati told it with a running accompaniment of interruptions and exclamations from Sylvia. There was very little to tell. It appeared that Monsieur Gallasseau called at eleven instead of twelve, carrying his violin case with him in the hansom. He was much disappointed that Amati was out. At first he said he would wait for him, but changed his mind in a few moments, and came down, with his violin case still in his hands, and drove away.

On his return before noon Amati heard the story, and missed his violin from its case. He

drove straight to the Frenchman's residence, about two miles away.

'When I got there,' Amati went on, 'I was told that Monsieur's flat was on the fourth floor. There was a porter at the entrance.

'"Can I see Signor Gallasseau?" I asked.

'"He has left strict directions he is not to be disturbed on any account."

'"Will you kindly take him my card?"

'He went with my card to the lift. There was a moment's delay. I stepped past unobserved and ran swiftly up the shallow stairs.'

'Bravo!' said Dora under her breath.

'I opened the door of the sitting-room on the fourth floor. It was not his—it was vacant. But above me I heard the sound of a violin. It was my own. I ran on; louder and sweeter the notes came. He can play—that Signor Gallasseau. I turned the handle of the door; it was locked. I beat upon it with my hands. The music ceased at once. There was a sound of steps in the room and a tinkling of metal. The next moment the door opened and Signor Gallasseau stood before me smiling.

'"Oh, Signor Amati," he said, "I am so

charmed to see you. You may go," this angrily to the porter who came up behind me. "I have just come from your place; you were not there. Did you mistake the hour or did I? I am so much grieved."

'I stood for a moment bewildered at his coolness. Then I broke out:

'"I came for the violin you carried away!"

'With a puzzled look on his face he offered me his own violin which lay on the table.

'"But for what," he said, "to play upon—is it not? It is at your service. But surely your own is much finer."

'"My own has been stolen, Signor."

'"Stolen! It is impossible! You do not know, then, where it is gone?"

'"But I do, Signor," I answered hotly. "It is here—here in your room; I heard it played a minute before the door was opened."

'For a moment he looked angry, then shrugged his shoulders and smiled.'

'"Monsieur is droll," he said. "But monsieur loves his violin as myself, and it is a fine instrument. Monsieur will be pleased to search my rooms."

'Then I searched everywhere, looking even in impossible places, and I found—nothing!

'"Monsieur is satisfied?" he asked politely.

'"Satisfied that you have hidden it cunningly," I answered.

'"Monsieur is pleased to be rude, but I can pardon him on account of his loss. Adieu."

'"Not adieu, Signor. I will come again, believe me."

'"Monsieur will be welcome."

'In the street I met Signora Sylvia, and she brought me to you.'

Dora listened intently with half-closed eyes and puckered brows.

'Now, I want to ask you a few questions. Don't you say a word, Sylvia. Did Monsieur Gallasseau look you straight in the face?'

'Straight in the face, with a smile on his own. His eyes were never off me while I was in the room.'

'Did you notice at his neck—no, a man would never notice that. But tell me, were there any mirrors in the room?'

'Oh, I had forgotten to mention it; there were four small mirrors with frames of wrought brass hanging by brass chains. But all four had their faces turned to the wall.'

'That was strange!'

'Very strange.'

'Did you turn them back again, Signor?'

'No, but I looked carefully behind them for an opening in the wall. There was none.'

'You are certain the violin was in the room when you knocked?'

'Quite certain; I heard it.'

'You could not have mistaken the sound?'

'Can a mother mistake the laugh of her baby, or a lover the voice of his love? No, it is impossible.'

'Yet you have not the least notion where the violin was hidden?'

'Not the least.'

'But you have, Dora!' broke in Sylvia impetuously.

'That remains to be seen, my dear. Now let us go to business. You say, Signor, there is a vacant set of chambers just under those of Monsieur Gallasseau? Well, I'll take those chambers to-morrow, and I will be glad to see you there as often and as long as you can spare time. That is if you don't object, my dear?' aside to Sylvia.

Sylvia's answer was a pinch and a kiss. The jest cheered her, for she guessed that Dora was not confident without cause.

On the third day, as Amati was visiting

Dora in her new quarters, he met Gallasseau on the stairs, and the Frenchman bowed with an amused smile on his handsome face.

That same afternoon, while Dora and Amati sat at tea, the strains of a violin were heard, superlatively sweet.

'Mine! mine!' Amati cried. 'Oh, I shall find it!'

He started from his seat excitedly, but Dora's restraining hand was on his arm.

'Softly, softly,' she said. 'You tried before, remember, and failed. It is my turn now.'

'We shall go together.'

'If you will, but I doubt if he will admit us both.'

They crept softly up the carpeted stairs together. The music sounded clearer and more sweet.

'There is no doubt?' whispered Dora.

'None, none,' he answered, with his hand upon the door knob. It was locked, but at the first rattle of the lock the music ceased. They heard four steps across the room, and instantly, as it seemed, the key was turned in the lock, and Monsieur Gallasseau stood in the doorway facing them, smiling.

'Good evening, mademoiselle; good even-

ing, monsieur. Monsieur is come to apologise, is he not?'

'I came to search,' Signor Amati answered shortly.

'What, again!' with a contemptuous shrug. 'Very good. For this one time. But you observe it is the last. I will be troubled no more.'

Dora and Amati made together towards the door. But Gallasseau blocked the entrance, facing them squarely.

'No, no, I will allow one—no more. It is you or mademoiselle. For me, I prefer mademoiselle, of course.'

Then Dora asserted herself.

'You must have your wish, monsieur. Signor Amati, if you will do me the favour to wait in my sitting-room, in five minutes I will bring you your violin.'

With an amused smile Gallasseau moved backwards from the door, allowing Dora to pass into the room.

'Mademoiselle is so droll!' he said, 'but she is welcome, very welcome to my poor rooms to find the violin—if she can.'

She gave one quick look round the room, but made no movement to search.

'The mirrors are gone, monsieur?' she said very quietly.

He started for a moment, but answered, still smiling:

'Mademoiselle has heard of my mirrors. Yes, they are gone to be relacquered. If I could have guessed this visit, there would have been mirrors for mademoiselle.'

'Oh, I think not, I really think not. You will pardon me for contradicting you, monsieur. Won't you sit down. I hate to keep you standing while I search.'

'Mademoiselle will pardon me; I will not sit down in her presence. I prefer to stand and look at mademoiselle, if I may?'

'Why, certainly.'

She had moved across the room to a table near the door where the Frenchman's own violin lay. There was a high backed chair close beside.

'Monsieur was seated here playing when he heard the handle turn in the door?'

'It is so, mademoiselle.'

'And you opened the door instantly?'

'As mademoiselle observes—instantly.'

'The chair is only three yards from the door; there was no time to hide a violin, monsieur.'

'No time at all, mademoiselle.'

'Unless you hid it quite close of course?'

'Quite close,' repeated the Frenchman vaguely, with a puzzled look on his face.

She changed the subject abruptly.

'Forgive me, monsieur, there is a little band of white ribbon running round your collar; it is drawn quite tight. It must incommode you, I fear. Will you allow me?'

He started back with a frightened look from her outstretched hand.

'Quite right,' she went on calmly, 'it is really not necessary. You are quick enough to see, monsieur, that the game is up. Turn round.'

Monsieur Gallasseau hesitated for a fraction of a second. Then he smiled a very sickly smile.

'Mademoiselle is very clevaire,' he said, and turning round showed the violin, like the golden hair of the young lady in the ballad, "hanging down his back."'

III

HOW HE CUT HIS STICK

He breathed freely at last as he lifted the small black Gladstone bag of stout calfskin, and set it carefully on the seat of the empty railway carriage close beside him.

He lifted the bag with a manifest effort. Yet he was a big powerfully built young fellow; handsome too in a way; with straw-coloured hair and moustache and a round face, placid, honest-looking but not too clever. His light blue eyes had an anxious worried look. No wonder, poor chap! he was weighted with a heavy responsibility. That unobtrusive black bag held 5,000*l.* in gold and notes which he—a junior clerk in the famous banking house of Gower and Grant—was taking from the head office in London to a branch two hundred miles down the line.

The older and more experienced clerk whose ordinary duty it was to convey the gold

had been taken strangely and suddenly ill at the last moment.

'There's Jim Pollock,' said the bank manager, looking round for a substitute, 'he'll do. He is big enough to knock the head off anyone that interferes with him.'

So Jim Pollock had the heavy responsibility thrust upon him. The big fellow who would tackle any man in England in a football rush without a thought of fear, was as nervous as a two-year-old child. All the way down to this point his watchful eyes and strong right hand had never left the bag for a moment. But here at the Eddiscombe Junction he had got locked in alone to a single first-class carriage, and there was a clear run of forty-seven miles to the next stoppage.

So with a sigh and shrug of relief, he threw away his anxiety, lay back on the soft seat, lit a pipe, drew a sporting paper from his pocket, and was speedily absorbed in the account of the Rugby International Championship match, for Jim himself was not without hopes of his 'cap' in the near future.

The train rattled out of the station and settled down to its smooth easy stride—a good fifty miles an hour through the open country.

Still absorbed in his paper he did not notice the gleam of two stealthy keen eyes that watched him from the dark shadow under the opposite seat. He did not see that long lithe wiry figure uncoil and creep out, silently as a snake, across the floor of the carriage.

He saw nothing and felt nothing till he felt two murderous hands clutching at his throat and a knee crushing his chest in.

Jim was strong, but before his sleeping strength had time to waken, he was down on his back on the carriage floor with a handkerchief soaked in chloroform jammed close to his mouth and nostrils.

He struggled desperately for a moment or so, half rose and almost flung off his clinging assailant. But even as he struggled the dreamy drug stole strength and sense away ; he fell back heavily and lay like a log on the carriage floor.

The faithful fellow's last thought as his senses left him was 'The gold is gone.' It was his first thought as he awoke with dizzy pain and racked brain from the deathlike swoon. The train was still at full speed ; the carriage doors were still locked ; but the carriage empty and the bag was gone.

He searched despairingly in the racks,

under the seats—all empty. Jim let the window down with a clash and bellowed.

The train began to slacken speed and rumble into the station. Half a dozen porters ran together—the station-master following more leisurely as beseemed his dignity. Speedily a crowd gathered round the door.

'I have been robbed,' Jim shouted, 'of a black bag with 5,000*l.* in it!'

Then the superintendent pushed his way through the crowd.

'Where were you robbed, sir?' he said with a suspicious look at the dishevelled and excited Jim.

'Between this and Eddiscombe Junction.'

'Impossible, sir, there is no stoppage between this and Eddiscombe, and the carriage is empty.'

'I thought it was empty at Eddiscombe, but there must have been a man under the seat.'

'There is no man under the seat now,' retorted the superintendent curtly; 'you had better tell your story to the police. There is a detective on the platform.'

Jim told his story to the detective, who listened gravely and told him that he must consider himself in custody pending inquiries.

A telegram was sent to Eddiscombe and it was found that communication had been stopped. This must have happened quite recently, for a telegram had gone through less than an hour before. The breakage was quickly located about nine miles outside Eddiscombe. Some of the wires had been pulled down half way to the ground, and the insulators smashed to pieces on one of the poles. All round the place the ground was trampled with heavy footprints which passed through a couple of fields out on the high road and were lost. No other clue of any kind was forthcoming.

The next day but one, a card, with the name 'Sir Gregory Grant,' was handed to Dora Myrl as she sat hard at work in the little drawing-room which she called her study. A portly, middle-aged, benevolent gentleman followed the card into the room.

'Miss Myrl?' he said, extending his hand, 'I have heard of you from my friend, Lord Millicent. I have come to entreat your assistance. I am the senior partner of the banking firm of Gower and Grant. You have heard of the railway robbery, I suppose?'

'I have heard all the paper had to tell me.'

'There is little more to tell. I have called

on you personally, Miss Myrl, because, personally, I am deeply interested in the case. It is not so much the money—though the amount is, of course, serious. But the honour of the bank is at stake. We have always prided ourselves on treating our clerks well, and heretofore we have reaped the reward. For nearly a century there has not been a single case of fraud or dishonesty amongst them. It is a proud record for our bank, and we should like to keep it unbroken if possible. Suspicion is heavy on young James Pollock. I want him punished, of course, if he is guilty, but I want him cleared if he is innocent. That's why I came to you.'

'The police think?'

'Oh, they think there can be no doubt about his guilt. They have their theory pat. No one was in the carriage—no one could leave it. Pollock threw out the bag to an accomplice along the line. They even pretend to find the mark in the ground where the heavy bag fell—a few hundred yards nearer to Eddiscombe than where the wires were pulled down.'

'What has been done?'

'They have arrested the lad and sent out the "Hue and Cry" for a man with a very heavy

calfskin bag—that's all. They are quite sure they have caught the principal thief anyway.'

'And you?'

'I will be frank with you, Miss Myrl. I have my doubts. The case *seems* conclusive. It is impossible that anybody could have got out of the train at full speed. But I have seen the lad, and I have my doubts.'

'Can I see him?'

'I would be very glad you did.'

After five minutes' conversation with Jim Pollock, Dora drew Sir Gregory aside.

'I think I see my way,' she said; 'I will undertake the case on one condition.'

'Any fee that——'

'It's not the fee. I never talk of the fee till the case is over. I will undertake the case if you give me Mr. Pollock to help me. Your instinct was right, Sir Gregory: the boy is innocent.'

There was much grumbling amongst the police when a *nolle prosequi* was entered on behalf of the bank, and James Pollock was discharged from custody, and it was plainly hinted the Crown would interpose.

Meanwhile Pollock was off by a morning train with Miss Dora Myrl, from London to

Eddiscombe. He was brimming over with gratitude and devotion. Of course they talked of the robbery on the way down.

'The bag was very heavy, Mr. Pollock?' Dora asked.

'I'd sooner carry it one mile than ten, Miss Myrl.'

'Yet you are pretty strong, I should think.'

She touched his protruding biceps professionally with her finger tips, and he coloured to the roots of his hair.

'Would you know the man that robbed you if you saw him again?' Dora asked.

'Not from Adam. He had his hands on my throat, the chloroform crammed into my mouth before I knew where I was. It was about nine or ten miles outside Eddiscombe. You believe there *was* a man—don't you, Miss Myrl? You are about the only person that does. I don't blame them, for how did the chap get out of the train going at the rate of sixty miles an hour—that's what fetches me, 'pon my word,' he concluded incoherently; 'if I was any other chap I'd believe myself guilty on the evidence. Can you tell how the trick was done, Miss Myrl?'

'That's my secret for the present, Mr.

Pollock, but I may tell you this much, when we get to the pretty little town of Eddiscombe I will look out for a stranger with a crooked stick instead of a black bag.'

There were three hotels in Eddiscombe, but Mr. Mark Brown and his sister were hard to please. They tried the three in succession, keeping their eyes about them for a stranger with a crooked stick, and spending their leisure time in exploring the town and country on a pair of capital bicycles, which they hired by the week.

As Miss Brown (alias Dora Myrl) was going down the stairs of the third hotel one sunshiny afternoon a week after their arrival, she met midway, face to face, a tall, middle-aged man limping a little, a very little, and leaning on a stout oak stick, with a dark shiny varnish, and a crooked handle. She passed him without a second glance. But that evening she gossiped with the chambermaid, and learned that the stranger was a commercial traveller—Mr. McCrowder—who had been staying some weeks at the hotel, with an occasional run up to London in the train, and run round the country on his bicycle, 'a nice, easily-pleased, pleasant-spoken gentleman,' the chambermaid added on her own account.

Next day Dora Myrl met the stranger again in the same place on the stairs. Was it her awkwardness or his? As she moved aside to let him pass, her little foot caught in the stick, jerked it from his hand, and sent it clattering down the stairs into the hall.

She ran swiftly down the stairs in pursuit, and carried it back with a pretty apology to the owner. But not before she had seen on the inside of the crook a deep notch, cutting through the varnish into the wood.

At dinner that day their table adjoined Mr. McCrowder's. Half way through the meal she asked Jim to tell her what the hour was, as her watch had stopped. It was a curious request, for she sat facing the clock, and he had to turn round to see it. But Jim turned obediently, and came face to face with Mr. McCrowder, who started and stared at the sight of him as though he had seen a ghost. Jim stared back stolidly without a trace of recognition in his face, and Mr. McCrowder, after a moment, resumed his dinner. Then Dora set, or seemed to set and wind her watch, and so the curious little incident closed.

That evening Dora played a musical little jingle on the piano in their private sitting-room,

touching the notes abstractedly and apparently deep in thought. Suddenly she closed the piano with a bang.

'Mr. Pollock?'

'Well, Miss Myrl,' said Jim, who had been watching her with the patient, honest, stupid, admiration of a big Newfoundland dog.

'We will take a ride together on our bicycles to-morrow. I cannot say what hour, but have them ready when I call for them.'

'Yes, Miss Myrl.'

'And bring a ball of stout twine in your pocket.'

'Yes, Miss Myrl.'

'By the way, have you a revolver?'

'Never had such a thing in my life.'

'Could you use it if you got it?'

'I hardly know the butt from the muzzle, but'—modestly—'I can fight a little bit with my fists if that's any use.'

'Not the least in this case. An ounce of lead can stop a fourteen stone champion. Besides one six-shooter is enough and I'm not too bad a shot.'

'You don't mean to say, Miss Myrl, that you——'

'I don't mean to say one word more

at present, Mr. Pollock, only have the bicycles ready when I want them and the twine.'

Next morning, after an exceptionally early breakfast, Dora took her place with a book in her hand coiled up on a sofa in a bow-window of the empty drawing-room that looked out on the street. She kept one eye on her book and the other on the window from which the steps of the hotel were visible.

About half-past nine o'clock she saw Mr. McCrowder go down the steps, not limping at all, but carrying his bicycle with a big canvas bicycle-bag strapped to the handle bar.

In a moment she was down in the hall where the bicycles stood ready; in another she and Pollock were in the saddle sailing swiftly and smoothly along the street just as the tall figure of Mr. McCrowder was vanishing round a distant corner.

'We have got to keep him in sight,' Dora whispered to her companion as they sped along, 'or rather I have got to keep him and you to keep me in sight. Now let me go to the front; hold as far back as you can without losing me, and the moment I wave a white handkerchief:—scorch!'

Pollock nodded and fell back, and in this

order—each about half a mile apart—the three riders swept out of the town into the open country.

The man in front was doing a strong steady twelve miles an hour, but the roads were good and Dora kept her distance without an effort, while Pollock held himself back. For a full hour this game of follow-my-leader was played without a change. Mr. McCrowder had left the town at the opposite direction to the railway, but now he began to wheel round towards the line. Once he glanced behind and saw only a single girl cycling in the distance on the deserted road. The next time he saw no one, for Dora rode close to the inner curve.

They were now a mile or so from the place where the telegraph wires had been broken down, and Dora, who knew the lie of the land, felt sure their little bicycle trip was drawing to a close.

The road climbed a long easy winding slope thickly wooded on either side. The man in front put on a spurt; Dora answered it with another, and Pollock behind sprinted fiercely, lessening his distance from Dora. The leader crossed the top bend of the slope, turned a sharp curve, and went swiftly down a smooth

decline, shaded by the interlacing branches of great trees.

Half a mile down at the bottom of the slope, he leaped suddenly from his bicycle with one quick glance back the way he had come. There was no one in view, for Dora held back at the turn. He ran his bicycle close into the wall on the left hand side where a deep trench hid it from the casual passers by; unstrapped the bag from the handle bar, and clambered over the wall with an agility that was surprising in one of his (apparent) age.

Dora was just round the corner in time to see him leap from the top of the wall into the thick wood. At once she drew out and waved her white handkerchief, then settled herself in the saddle and made her bicycle fly through the rush of a sudden wind, down the slope.

Pollock saw the signal; bent down over his handle bar and pedalled uphill like the piston rods of a steam engine.

The man's bicycle by the roadside was a finger post for Dora. She, in her turn, overperched the wall as lightly as a bird. Gathering her tailor-made skirt tight around her, she peered and listened intently. She could see nothing, but a little way in front a slight rustling of the

branches caught her quick ears. Moving in the underwood, stealthily and silently as a rabbit, she caught a glimpse through the leaves of a dark grey tweed suit fifteen or twenty yards off. A few steps more and she had a clear view. The man was on his knees; he had drawn a black leather bag from a thick tangle of ferns at the foot of a great old beech tree, and was busy cramming a number of small canvas sacks into his bicycle bag.

Dora moved cautiously foward till she stood in a little opening, clear of the undergrowth, free to use her right arm.

'Good morning, Mr. McCrowder!' she cried sharply.

The man started, and turned and saw a girl half a dozen yards off standing clear in the sunlight, with a mocking smile on her face.

His lips growled out a curse; his right hand left the bags and stole to his side pocket.

'Stop that!' The command came clear and sharp. 'Throw up your hands!'

He looked again. The sunlight glinted on the barrel of a revolver, pointed straight at his head, with a steady hand.

'Up with your hands, or I fire!' and his hands went up over his head. The next instant

Jim Pollock came crashing through the underwood, like an elephant through the jungle.

He stopped short with a cry of amazement.

'Steady!' came Dora's quiet voice; 'don't get in my line of fire. Round there to the left —that's the way. Take away his revolver. It is in his right-hand coat pocket. Now tie his hands!'

Jim Pollock did his work stolidy as directed. But while he wound the strong cord round the wrists and arms of Mr. McCrowder, he remembered the railway carriage and the strangling grip at his throat, and the chloroform, and the disgrace that followed, and if he strained the knots extra tight it's hard to blame him.

'Now,' said Dora, 'finish his packing,' and Jim crammed the remainder of the canvas sacks into the big bicycle bag.

'You don't mind the weight?'

He gave a delighted grin for answer, as he swung both bags in his hands.

'Get up!' said Dora to the thief, and he stumbled to his feet sulkily. 'Walk in front. I mean to take you back to Eddiscombe with me.'

When they got on the road-side Pollock

strapped the bicycle bag to his own handle-bar.

'May I trouble you, Mr. Pollock, to unscrew one of the pedals of this gentleman's bicycle?' said Dora.

It was done in a twinkling. 'Now give him a lift up,' she said to Jim; 'he his going to ride back with one pedal.'

The abject thief held up his bound wrists imploringly.

'Oh, that's all right. I noticed you held the middle of your handle-bar from choice coming out. You'll do it from necessity going back. We'll look after you. Don't whine; you've played a bold game and lost the odd trick, and you've got to pay up that's all.'

There was a wild sensation in Eddiscombe when, in broad noon, the bank thief was brought in riding on a one-pedalled machine to the police barrack and handed into custody. Dora rode on through the cheering crowd to the hotel.

A wire brought Sir Gregory Grant down by the afternoon train, and the three dined together that night at his cost; the best dinner and wine the hotel could supply. Sir Gregory was brimming over with delight, like the bubbling champagne in his wine glass.

'Your health, Mr. Pollock,' said the banker to the junior clerk. 'We will make up in the bank to you for the annoyance you have had. You shall fix your own fee, Miss Myrl—or, rather, I'll fix it for you if you allow me. Shall we say half the salvage? But I'm dying with curiosity to know how you managed to find the money and thief.'

'It was easy enough when you come to think of it, Sir Gregory. The man would have been a fool to tramp across the country with a black bag full of gold while the "Hue and Cry" was hot on him. His game was to hide it and lie low, and he did so. The sight of Mr. Pollock at the hotel hurried him up as I hoped it would; that's the whole story.'

'Oh, that's not all. How did you find the man? How did the man get out of the train going at the rate of sixty miles an hour? But I suppose I'd best ask that question of Mr. Pollock, who was there?'

'Don't ask me any questions, sir,' said Jim, with a look of profound admiration in Dora's direction. 'She played the game off her own bat. All I know is that the chap cut his stick after he had done for me. I cannot in the least tell how.'

'Will you have pity on my curiosity, Miss Myrl.'

'With pleasure, Sir Gregory. You must have noticed, as I did, that where the telegraph was broken down the line was embanked and the wires ran quite close to the railway carriage. It was easy for an active man to slip a crooked stick like this' (she held up Mr. McCrowder's stick as she spoke) 'over the two or three of the wires and so swing himself into the air clear of the train. The acquired motion would carry him along the wires to the post and give him a chance of breaking down the insulators.'

'By Jove! you're right, Miss Myrl. It's quite simple when one comes to think of it. But, still, I don't understand how ——.'

'The friction of the wire,' Dora went on in the even tone of a lecturer, 'with a man's weight on it, would bite deep into the wood of the stick, like that!' Again she held out the crook of a dark thick oak stick for Sir Gregory to examine, and he peered at it through his gold spectacles.

'The moment I saw that notch,' Dora added quietly, 'I knew how Mr. McCrowder had "CUT HIS STICK."'

IV

THE PALMIST

'DEAREST DORA,—Come see me if you can. I'm in terrible trouble, ever your loving

'PUSSIE'

'What is it, I wonder,' thought Dora turning the telegram over in her hand. 'One could as easily imagine a canary bird "in terrible trouble" as Pussie. It was like her to put her trouble and her love in this way on the wire. Her terrible trouble is very likely the death of a pet lap dog. Well! I must go any way. I haven't been to see her for six months or more.'

Here it may be interpolated that Eveline—otherwise and always 'Pussie' Morris—was an orphan, living with her guardian, Dr. Phillimore and his wife, in a pretty villa outside London. Pussie was an heiress, and Dr. Phillimore was himself a very wealthy man; and though he

made belief to practice, his profession was rather his hobby than an avocation.

'You are a darling; you always were and always will be a darling,' was Pussie's enthusiastic greeting as she met Dora at the gates of Lilac Lodge, and flung herself headlong into her arms. She was a fair-haired, blue eyed, dimpled little beauty that looked fifteen and was twenty. But now her eyes were red-rimmed with much weeping, and the tears broke out afresh as she spoke. She laid a timid restraining hand on Dora's arm as they crossed the grounds and neared the door of the villa.

'Don't go in, please,' she whispered, 'let us stay out here and talk. I'm frightened of this place since the murder and the inquest.'

'Murder and inquest!' cried Dora in utter amazement.

'Oh! I forgot, you would not know. Dr. Phillimore has managed to keep it out of the papers so far. Mrs. Phillimore was poisoned last week, and my poor nurse, Honor Maguire —the only person in the whole world who loved me except you, dear, I know—has been charged with her murder and carried away to prison.'

Here she broke down so helplessly that Dora led her away to a quiet seat at the far end of the grounds under a cluster of lilacs in full blow that gave their name to the place, and petted and coaxed her like a frightened child.

'Now tell me the whole story, Pussie, straight out,' Dora insisted when the sobbing girl had subsided.

'Well, I'll do my best, but my brain is dizzy with the horrible things that have been happening. You know that poor Honor has been with me ever since I was a baby. After father and mother died and I came here, Honor came too. It was in father's will, and though they were never nice to her she stayed on for my sake. Whenever Mrs. Phillimore treated me badly—and she did very often lately— I don't know why, Honor fought with her fiercely. Dr. Phillimore was most kind to me for the last year or so, but his wife was worse than ever. She used to say things to me often I could not repeat even to you, Dora. Then about three months ago Miss Graham came.'

'And who was Miss Graham?'

'She was by way of a governess or a companion, or something for me. It was Dr.

Phillimore found her out. She was awfully nice to me, and ever so handsome, with wonderful big brown eyes and a glorious figure. I never saw any eyes to compare with hers or yours, for that matter. I was very happy for a while. The doctor was the very pink of politeness and perfection and brought us about everywhere. But Mrs. Phillimore was crosser than ever. She was particularly rude to Miss Graham, who seemed never even to notice it. But one day about a week ago she—that is Miss Graham came to me crying and said she was going away at once ; I was surprised and broken-hearted at the very thought of it and I asked her was it that Mrs. Phillimore again. But she said not, that she pitied Mrs. Phillimore from the bottom of her heart. She would not tell me the reason of her running away like that all in a moment, and when I wanted to speak to the doctor about it she got quite hysterical and made me promise to do nothing of the kind. Just at the last I coaxed her again to tell me why she was going, but she only cried and blushed and hid her face in her hands. Then all of a sudden she jumped up and kissed me and sobbed out "Good bye, my pet, good bye, and never believe anything

wicked of me, no matter what anyone says." I could see that Mrs. Phillimore was glad she was going, but the doctor seemed as sorry as myself.

'He stood at the cab door bare-headed as she was leaving, but she would not as much as look at him or touch his hand when he offered to help her in. But she kissed hands to me at the window and smiled through her tears. The last thing I saw was Mrs. Phillimore shake her fist at her as she drove away. About an hour afterwards I was in the drawing-room crying when Mrs. Phillimore and the doctor came in. She took not the least notice of me. But the doctor came up quickly and put his arm round my waist and kissed me, quite as a matter of course, though he had never done such a thing in his life before.

'I was too surprised to say a word. I thought he wanted to comfort me and I didn't mind really—he's old enough to be my father. But his wife flew at me like a tigress and caught me by the hair and struck me repeatedly on the face. I thought she was mad for a moment, and was so frightened I could not even cry out. Dr. Phillimore seemed almost equally surprised; he made no effort to save

me, but rung the bell furiously. Then I screamed ; Honor dashed into the room, with the fat butler panting close at her heels. She rushed straight at Mrs. Phillimore and caught her by the shoulders, tore her away ; and though she was a big strong woman, Honor shook her like a child.

'"You wicked old cat!" she cried, "if ever you dare lay your dirty hands again on my innocent darlint, I'll be the death of you, so I will." Then she flung Mrs. Phillimore from her all in a heap on the carpet and ran to me, and petted and coaxed me, as though I were still a baby. I heard the doctor and his wife leave the room without speaking, and the butler followed, muttering to himself, "It's an infernal shame."

'We two—Honor and I—sat down on the hearthrug in front of the cheery fire. I put my head on her shoulder and we talked of the dear old times before we came to this horrid place. But something far more horrible happened that very night. Mrs. Phillimore was poisoned with arsenic, and died next morning in spite of all the doctor could do to save her. The poison was put in a cup of chocolate which she was accustomed to take

the last thing before going to bed every night. One of the servants swore at the inquest that she heard Honor say she'd give the mistress a dose that she wouldn't like, and another was 'almost certain' she saw Honor put something out of a paper into the chocolate. Dr. Phillimore had bought some arsenic a few days before and left it on a shelf in his surgery, plainly labelled 'Poison.' The parcel had been opened and enough poison taken from it to kill ten men. He had seen Honor coming out of the surgery that night, and she told him she had gone in to shut the window. As well as he remembered, he had shut the window himself an hour before. All this came out at the inquest, and the jury found a verdict of wilful murder against poor Honor, and sent her for trial.'

'I was let see her once since. She wasn't a bit frightened, and spent the whole time cheering me up. She "always hated Mrs. Phillimore," she said, "that was true enough, but she was as innocent as the child unborn of the likes of murder, and God would protect the innocent." Oh! I'm so glad you have come, Dora. I've read all your wonderful doings and I'm sure you'll save her.'

'That depends, Pussie dear. It looks a very bad case on the face of it. If she is guilty I don't want even to try to save her, I hate and detest poisoners—the worst of all criminals. People talk of a revolting murder when blood is shed and bones broken in wild passion. But the clean, quiet, cold-blooded poisoning is infinitely more revolting to my mind.'

'But Honor is innocent. I'll swear it if you like.'

'Your love makes you think so, my dear.'

'Oh! it's not that; I know it in my heart. You will go all wrong, Dora, if you start thinking her guilty.'

'What does Dr. Phillimore believe?'

'Oh! he's a strange man. He does not believe in anything or anyone; not even in God. He does not even pretend to be a bit sorry for his wife or a bit angry with Honor, and he has promised to have the best counsel to defend her.'

'But he believes her guilty!'

'He does not say that. He says the evidence is very strong against her; he goes altogether on the evidence.'

'Will he be angry at my coming here?'

'Not at all. He knows you are coming. I asked him if I might have a friend to stay with me, as I was lonely and frightened. He seemed quite pleased, and said "Yes, of course" —then after a moment he asked me was it Miss Graham. I told him it was you, and he said, "Oh, the lady detective; bring her by all means"—and laughed. You don't mind his laughing, Dora?'

'Not in the least.'

'And you've come to stay—haven't you, dear?'

'Well yes, if you want me to. I'll go for some things and be back to dinner, but I have a few questions to ask you and a few places to go to first. The chocolate was analysed of course—can you tell me the name of the analyst?'

'Let me see, I think it was—yes, it was Dr. Fallon.'

'I know him—a very clever man in his line. But I want to see Miss Graham too. Do you know her address? I also want to know the prison your old nurse is gone to?'

'I can give you both.'

'That's good. Write them down for me to make sure, and then good-bye till dinner

hour; seven, I think it is. All right. Keep up your spirits, Puss, I'll do my little best, I promise you, to save the innocent and catch the guilty.' A hansom that she had waiting whirled her away.

Dr. Phillimore was delighted to see Miss Myrl at dinner, and welcomed her cordially and cheerfully without the least affectation of grief for his wife's death.

He was a tall, powerfully built man that did not look more than forty years of age in spite of a thin sprinkling of white through his dark glossy hair. His face was strong and handsome. Perhaps his mouth, with its double row of even white teeth, was a shade too large, and his lips a shade too thick; but the large soft dark eyes gave a certain gentleness to his face, and his voice was wonderfully bland.

'I cannot play the hypocrite, Miss Myrl,' he said with engaging candour, 'or make a pretence of a sorrow that I don't feel. My wife was a woman of ungovernable temper. She was very cruel to your friend Pussie, and she made my life and her own miserable. It is best for us all, herself included, that she is gone.'

'Have you no thought of the next world, Dr. Phillimore?'

'Oh! he doesn't believe in any next world,' Pussie interrupted; 'isn't it awful?'

Dr. Phillimore pushed away his empty soup plate and sipped his sherry complacently.

'You don't profess to believe in such foolishness, I hope, Miss Myrl?' he said blandly. 'Nobody does really believe nowadays except a very few fanatics, though most people think it respectable to make belief to believe. The priests of all sects of course try to keep up the delusion and to frighten people into faith, as they call it.'

'He's an Atheist, Dora,' interjected Pussie again.

'Not exactly, my dear,' Dr. Phillimore went on softly as a purring cat, pleased with the sound of his own voice. 'I don't believe in God and I don't disbelieve. I simply don't know. But I, Dr. Phillimore, don't expect any existence after death except, of course, the chemical existence of the elements of my body, in which I am not particularly interested. I mean to get all the enjoyment I can out of this life while I have it. A life in the hand, Miss Myrl, is worth two in the bush.'

He finished a glass of dry champagne like one who was putting his theory into practice.

'But this theory of yours,' Dora said, 'would relieve the world from all moral restraint.'

'Moral restraint; yes—if there were such a thing. But the fear of detection and punishment remains. It is fear that prevents crime, believe me. We could all go just where we want to if we could be sure of hiding our footsteps.'

'Do you believe in nothing, Dr. Phillimore?' Dora asked, with a flattering interest in her voice.

'Oh! I'm always open to conviction. I believe in anything and everything that is proved to me. For example, I believe in many things that the vulgar regard as superstitions, because the proved facts in their favour seem to me conclusive. I am not one of those who refuse the evidence of their own senses and deny everything they cannot find a known law to account for. It appears to me there is a great deal in theosophy, for example, and astrology, and phrenology. Palmistry especially seems to have clearly established its claim to acceptance by unprejudiced seekers of the truth.'

'I have heard marvellous things about the palmists from many of my friends,' Dora confessed. 'One lady assured me she was told

her whole past and future life and the name and appearance of her husband who was to be. It all was true or came true just as the palmist said, and that was only one case in many.'

'Don't stir, Miss Myrl,' he said, 'if you don't object to my cigar,' for Dora and Pussie rose together from the table. 'You excite my curiosity. Do you know the name of this wonderful palmist?'

'Madame Celestine was the name. Have you a copy of the "Times" in the house?'

The 'Times' was sent for, and they found Madame Celestine's advertisement in a prominent place.

'I have a great mind to drop in some time to test her skill,' said Dr. Phillimore, with affected carelessness. He was intensely interested.

'There is no use in your "dropping in," said Dora, 'you may be kept all day. Her reputation has brought clients in droves. Her parlours are more crowded than any fashionable doctor's, and her fees are just the same. Her fee for a special appointment is five guineas.'

'It's worth it,' Dr. Phillimore said, 'if she can really give one a peep into the future.' He moved from his armchair to a desk in a corner

of the dining room and drew a cheque and scribbled a note. Then he tore up both and threw them into the grate. 'I must not give myself away,' he said, smiling over his shoulder at Dora. 'Her knowledge of my past must vouch for her knowledge of my future. I'll send a postal order to-morrow, and have the reply addressed to the post office.'

Next day after dinner Dr. Phillimore showed Dora Madame Celestine's appointment for the following day at four, with a pink card to secure him instant admission to her consulting room.

He was evidently much pleased and excited. 'Have you ever tried palmistry yourself, Miss Myrl?' he asked.

'Not yet; I may, some day.'

'You ought. It would be useful to you in your profession. I believe you practise as a lady detective?'

'Now you are laughing at me, Dr. Phillimore!'

'Not at all! not at all!' he protested politely. 'Still, you must confess it is a somewhat incongruous—I won't say comical—profession for a charming young lady.'

'You think us women all weak and foolish?' she said smiling.

'Oh! it's not that,' he answered, with a deprecatory wave of his strong white hand. 'I would not harbour such a thought for the world.' But all the time it was plain that was precisely what he did think. 'You, of course, are the exception, Miss Myrl. But do you think that women can fairly pit themselves in mind and body against cunning and strong men, and the so-called criminal classes as a rule are both?'

'Women are clever and men are confident; their confidence betrays them.'

'Well, well, let us put cleverness out of the question for a moment. How could a charming young lady, like yourself, for example, arrest a powerful desperado who had not the least respect for her sex or her beauty?'

'Oh! I'd manage it somehow.'

'Forgive me, Miss Myrl; that is one of your sex's pretty evasions. Let us suppose for a moment that I was your criminal. I never go a step without a loaded revolver, and I'm a dead shot. But I would not need that. I could crush the life out of you with my naked hand.'

Smilingly he stretched out a large shapely white hand, and the muscles packed like a cable

coil on his arm stirred under the tightened sleeve of his evening coat.

'But I won't suppose you against me,' cried Dora, 'I will suppose you assisting me in my capture; that's far more likely.'

'Thank you for the compliment, Miss Myrl. I promise to help you if ever I get the chance. By the way, what do you say to coming with me to-morrow to your friend Madame Celestine?'

'I'm afraid that would be impossible. I have very important work to do to-morrow, but you shall see me later on.'

'Detective work?' he asked, smiling.

'Yes, detective work,' she said, with an answering smile.

Madame Celestine's residence was a staid respectable house in a staid respectable street with eminent medical practitioners on either side, and a neat brass plate on the door.

At the touch of the electric bell the door was opened by a footman in livery, and Dr. Phillimore entered a well-furnished hall. A parlour door opened and a lady came out, and he could see the room was full of clients. But he presented his pink card to the footman and

was shown up a private staircase to Madame Celestine's consulting room.

It was a large back room on the drawing-room floor, draped in dark velvet and very dimly lighted. At the far end he could just distinguish a pale-faced woman and a white hand beckoning him through the dusk. Almost over her head an electric lamp was suspended with a narrow funnel-shaped shade that made the light fall in a round white blotch on the floor. There was a second chair set close to the lady's, on which Dr. Phillimore seated himself.

She took his large white hand in her two little ones and held it palm upwards under the full downward glare of the electric light, studying the lines intently.

He felt her finger tips tremble as she gazed.

'There is here strength without scruple,' she began in a low musical voice, 'your life has run and will run no common course.'

'Come to facts,' he said, interrupting her.

'Shall I speak of your past or of your future?'

'First of the past. It will be my guarantee that what you tell me of the future is true.'

'It is well,' she answered, 'it is along the road of the past that the knowledge of the future is reached.'

She told him his name and age, and the date of his marriage.

'But,' he answered rudely, 'these are the tricks of the common fortune-teller!'

'Shall I speak of your character and opinions?'

'No, I have made no secret of either. Tell me of something known only to myself, and I will believe in you?'

'Some secret of your life?'

'Some secret of my life.'

'Some crime?'

He started but restrained himself.

'Yes,' he answered, 'if you choose to call it so, some crime.'

There was a long pause, and then the woman's voice said slowly, 'You have poisoned your wife!'

'It's a lie!' he answered fiercely, half rising from his chair.

But she held his hand with hands that no longer trembled. 'It is no lie,' she answered firmly; 'you know it for the truth. Sit still, and I will tell you every detail of the murder and

the motive that inspired it.' He yielded to the fascination of her voice and touch and sat still, devoured by a burning curiosity which conquered his fear and amazement. The man's coolness had come back to him.

'I will listen to what you've got to say,' he answered cautiously.

'Your wife was a very jealous and violent woman,' she began.

'Keep off the common-place!' he warned her.

'But,' she went on without heeding, 'you took your pleasures freely without regard to her jealousy. Your ward's governess, Miss Graham, inspired you with a fierce, devouring passion!'

He started again, and instinctively half closed the hand on whose lines she gazed.

But he opened it wide in a moment, and muttered 'Go on.'

'You proposed to Mabel Graham to become your mistress, and she refused indignantly and left the house the same day.'

'She may have told you all that——'

'She could not have told me what followed. You resolved to get rid of your wife without danger to yourself, and make an Irishwoman, Honor Maguire, the scapegoat. You kissed

your ward that evening to rouse your wife's jealousy and provoke her to violence, which would madden the hot-tempered Irishwoman, whose threats, you knew, would be valuable evidence against her. Fortune favoured you still more. The Irishwoman, in revenge, put senna in your wife's chocolate. You saw her go into your surgery, and hoped she would use the arsenic. But failing that, you yourself used it, and turned suspicion upon her.'

The palmist spoke in a low voice, yet so distinctly that every word was heard. Strange as it may seem, Dr. Phillimore, having recovered from the first shock of surprise and fear, listened with something of that satisfaction one feels in having one's beliefs confirmed. The powers of palmistry were proved, and he was anxious to employ them.

There was but slight tincture of fear in the man's nature; of shame—none.

'All this is very interesting,' he answered in a voice as steady as her own.

'Is it not true?'

'If you know so well, what need to ask of me?'

'Because on your past your future depends. Moving on from the past through the present

to the future. I must make each step certain as I go. Again I ask you, is what I have spoken true?'

The man's sardonic spirit mastered him.

'It is quite true,' he answered. 'But all the same I am ready to swear it is false, should the need arise.'

'Whose hand put the arsenic in your wife's cup?'

'It was mine, I tell you!'

She would have spoken again, but he interrupted sharply: 'It's my turn to question now. Tell me, shall Mabel Graham ever be mine as wife or mistress—I care not which?'

She examined his hands intently; first the right and then the left.

'I see——' she began.

'Yes, yes,' he interrupted eagerly.

'The lines are faint,' she said. 'Your fate is there, but vaguely written. I am almost certain, but I must see more before I speak. The backs of the hands are often as legible as the palms.'

At this she set the two palms of his hands together, so that the finger tips and the wrists were touching, and bent down to examine them more closely.

There was a sudden gleam in the white light ; a sharp click of steel, and the handcuffs were tight on the doctor's wrists.

'This is your answer,' cried Dora Myrl's voice as she leaped from her chair. 'Mabel Graham is safe for ever from your pursuit, and Honor Maguire from the halter!'

The room was suddenly flooded with electric light, and two men in police uniform broke from behind the velvet drapings and laid heavy hands upon his shoulders.

V

THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST

'May I come in, Miss Myrl?'

He came in as he spoke, a young fellow, well dressed, handsome, with laughing brown eyes, full of fun and mischief.

Dora wheeled sharply round on her office chair, and stared at him.

'Don't look at me like that, *please*.'

He held his shiny hat before his face as if to shield himself from her eyes, and spoke from behind it. 'I danced three dances with you the night before last at Lord Millicent's, and sat out one in the conservatory and you gave me leave to call. Now, don't you remember?'

'No, I don't remember.' She had to bite her lips to keep back a smile, for there was a delightful audacity in the gay fellow's manner.

'That's awful! But you remember the conservatory, don't you?'

'Yes, I remember the conservatory.'

'And I asked to be let call, and you said "no" so prettily that I knew you meant "yes."' [She shook her head.]

'Well, perhaps I was mistaken; you said it so very nicely. Anyhow, I am here now, and I know you'll give me a cup of tea before you turn me out. May I sit down? Thanks. I want to have a talk with you. I didn't in the least know who you were last night. The Gov. told me—you know my Governor, Miss Myrl, Sir Gregory Grant; he's half in love with you—he is, upon my soul. The Gov. and I are great old pals; we always have a cigar after the dance, and tell each other everything. "Glad to see you show good taste at last, my boy," said the Gov. to me that night.

'"Do you mean that nice little girl in pink, sir?"

'"Who else?"

'"A dear innocent little thing," I said, "I'm over head and ears in love with her already. I mean to propose as soon as I find out her name."

'The Governor burst out laughing; then the cigar smoke went the wrong way and nearly choked him. "Propose, indeed," he coughed,

"she would not look at a young puppy like you. Your dear innocent little girl is Miss Dora Myrl, the famous Cambridge wrangler and Lady Detective." But I could see the Gov. was dead jealous. Please tell me he was all wrong?'

'Well, I certainly am Dora Myrl. I don't know about the famous.'

'Oh! the famous is all right; that's not what I meant. But if I were to propose?'

'I should instantly refuse you,' said Dora, laughing in spite of herself.

'Then we will consider that's all over. Now we're good friends, aren't we? Girls always are with the chaps they refuse, and I want you to do me a good turn for another friend of mine, Miss Myrl.'

He dropped the light burlesque he played so prettily. For the first time Dora began to suspect there was a meaning in his visit.

'You are serious this time?' she asked.

'Quite. My father told me about you and I can see for myself you are a good sort, and——

'Tell me your story,' said Dora, cutting him short.

'Well, you know Sir Warner Hernshaw?'

'I don't know much good of him. I know that he gambles, cards, horses, stock exchange;

anything and everything, and makes it pay. If he backs a horse, it generally wins. If he lays against a horse, it always loses. If his name is in a directorate the shares soar—at first.'

'You don't like Sir Warner?'

'No, though he makes belief to like me. He's too handsome and gracious and *lucky* for my taste.'

'That's all right. Sir Warner has laid unholy hands on my cousin and chief pal Lord Wellmount, who is the decentest chap living, but as innocent as they make them. Wellmount came into his estate and fortune last year. It's a big thing, for he and the estate were at nurse together. He's scattering the money with both hands ever since. Three months ago Sir Warner eased him of £10,000. He'll ease him of £50,000 in three weeks time, I do believe, if you won't lend us a helping hand.'

'But how; how? Tell your story right out, can't you?'

She spoke sharply. Grant opened his eyes in amazement. This was a new Dora. He could hardly believe it was the same girl with whom he had interchanged gay badinage in the drawing-room and conservatory two nights before.

'It was this way. You may have heard Warner has bought a fine old place—Wolverholt. He goes in for big house parties, which are good fun in their way. There are tennis-courts, cricket ground, golf links, and a private race course all within the ring fence of the demesne wall. Now Sir Warner has a wonderful horse —"The Jumping Frog" he calls him—that won the Grand National at thirty to one two years ago; and Wellmount has a better horse still to my thinking that won at evens last year. Since then both horses have been handicapped out of everything as the two best steeplechasers in the United Kingdom. They had never met till about four months ago Sir Warner proposed a private match on his own race course for a ten thousand bet and Sir Warner won.'

'Well, there's not much in that. No one can tell for certain which of two good horses is the better.'

'Give me a little time, Miss Myrl. It was a grand race everyway. "Goneaway"—that's Lord Wellmount's—led from the first. He was five lengths ahead, going well within himself, at the second last fence that led into the straight. It was a big thick bullfinch, but nothing to stop a fencer. He rose to it

beautifully, I saw him, made no mistake in the jump, but stood stock still shivering on the other side, and his jockey couldn't get a stir out of him with whip or spur; while "Jumping Frog" romped home past the winning post. The most curious thing of all is that in five minutes more "Goneaway" was as fresh as paint again, and there was not a mark on him anywhere. He looked like a horse that had got a bad fright, but there was nothing to frighten him.'

'I suppose not,' said Dora. 'But anyway this business is clear over; you cannot go back on that old race.' There was a touch of disappointment in her voice.

'It's beginning all over again,' said Archie Grant eagerly. 'They have a new match on in three weeks—fifty thousand aside this time. Lord Wellmount thinks his the better horse; I think so too. But all the same I'm sure he'll get licked. I have just discovered that Sir Warner is laying heavily with the bookies on his own nomination. It is even betting with Wellmount. But he's giving the bookies three to two and even two to one when he cannot get on easier. Now Sir Warner is not the man to do that unless it was a dead certainty.

To make matters worse, Wellmount has taken it into his head to run over to America in a steam yacht, and left me in sole charge of horse and race.'

'But what do you want me to do about it?'

'I'd like you to go down for the race.'

'But I cannot go without an invitation.'

'Oh! that's easy enough managed. The Aylmers are going down. Jolly woman Mrs. Aylmer, and she raves about you, Miss Myrl. She said she will be delighted to take you down under her wing. She told me so yesterday herself.'

'You seem to have laid your plans very confidently?'

'Oh! Sir Warner is always glad to welcome a pretty girl. You don't mind me saying that? I'll be there too, if that is any inducement.'

'It isn't. You'll be in the way, I've no doubt. Still, I wouldn't have you stay away on my account.'

'Then you'll come?'

'Yes, I'll come.'

'By the way, there was one thing I forgot to tell you. It's not of any consequence really, but I suppose you should know everything. The telegraph broke down just after the race.

I mentioned, didn't I, that Sir Warner had the telegraph run in from the road to the race course for the occasion. No? Well, he had. But when Lord Wellmount wanted to send a message it was found the wire had been cut about seven miles away, right opposite a shooting box of Sir Warner's, a place for lunch, and that sort of thing, on the edge of the estate. Curious, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' Dora assented slowly, 'very curious.'

The arrangement worked without a hitch. Dora had a very hearty welcome from Sir Warner, whose black eyes lighted at sight of the bright, piquant little woman whose pretensions as a detective he regarded with good-humoured amusement.

Dora and Archie Grant struck up a mild flirtation under cover of which they were constantly on the grounds with golf sticks or tennis bats, or on the road with their bicycles, exploring.

The big black bullfinch was a special object of interest to Dora. It was a very high, thick hedge, but with no heavy timber in it that could stop or hurt a horse, standing in a secluded little dip of the grounds quite out of sight of the house. Here, secretly exploring with

Grant, she made three curious discoveries. On the ground close to the roots of the blackthorns they picked up a number of grains of what looked like buckshot, but, on rubbing the black off, they proved to be red copper. Searching the branches she discovered a few thin tattered fragments of the oil silk or gutta-percha tissue that is used in surgery, and finally Dora dug out of the ground near the inner edge of the fence a small medicine bottle with a narrow neck, quite empty.

Grant was more and more bewildered at each discovery.

'I think I begin to see light,' Dora said, 'but we will wait.'

So they waited for ten days more, and all was made ready for the race. The telegraph was brought in again from the road close at hand to the race course. Sir Warner employed his own electrical engineer for the purpose—a big canny Yorkshire man named Shore—who, instead of poles, used a thin isolated 'cable,' running in a shallow trench underground. He seemed to take his own time at the work, lolling about half the day lazily. Dora, coming upon him the second day, said quite innocently: 'I hope there will be no break-down like the

last time?' and he just grinned half-sheepishly and half-amused, and went on with his work without answering.

'Would it be something too awful,' she whispered to Grant the night but one before the race, 'if we went for a little moonlight stroll on our bicycles?'

'Who'll know?' he answered delightedly.

The whole party were out on the moonlit lawn after dinner; each couple absorbed in its own affairs. 'I can bring the machines round to the dark corner of the avenue yonder.'

'All right. I'll get some kind of dark cover-me-up and be with you in ten minutes.'

In ten minutes they were smoothly skirting the demesne. When they came to a corner where they had a clear view of the fence, Dora slipped from her saddle, motioning Grant to do the same. A big man, black in the moonlight, was at work on the fence. Dora watched him for a moment or two through a strong field-glass.

'He is going,' whispered Grant at her ear.

The man gathered his implements together and made his way out to the road. There his bicycle stood in the shadow of a wall. He

slipped the bag over the handle-bar and was up and away.

'What next?' Archie whispered. It was getting exciting.

'Follow; just keep him in sight.'

They followed for about seven miles on a smooth road, and saw the man turn into the gate of Sir Warner's little shooting-box and disappear.

'Ah,' said Dora, with a little pant of triumph, for she was out of breath, 'now we may go home.'

The lawn party was still abroad, and they got into the house without accident or discovery.

'The golf links after breakfast,' said Dora to Grant as they said good-night; 'we can talk while we play.'

They had the wide links to themselves, for the company were all absorbed in the coming race.

He knelt to make a 'tee' for her.

'No sand, please. I drive from the flat.' She swung her driver with a free sweep, hit the ball a clean sweet smack, plumb centre, and sent it sharp and low a good hundred yards straight for the hole. Grant drove his

seventy yards further, and landed in a bunker to the right.

'No more golf,' said Dora, as they strolled away together. 'I couldn't resist just one drive. But we have some quick work on hand. You were right, Mr. Grant, there has been foul play, and will be again if we don't stop it.'

'I was sure of it. But how was the trick managed?'

'That I cannot tell you.'

'Won't, you mean?'

'Well, won't, if you like that any better.'

'We must stop the match, any way?'

'No, that's just it, the match must go on. I think you told me the jockey takes his directions from you?'

'That's so.'

'Will you take your directions from me?' very earnestly.

'All right. You boss this show.'

'Then "Goneaway" must run a waiting race and let "Jumping Frog" lead into the straight.'

'Can't be done,' said Grant shortly.

'Why not? You don't trust me?'

'It's not that, Miss Myrl, 'pon my soul it's not that. But the jockey couldn't do it if he

would, and wouldn't if he could. "Gone-away" always makes the running, goes away like a locomotive from start to finish. Has got the temper of an angel if you give him his head, but he simply won't be passed. He'll break his heart if he is.'

'He'll lose the race if he isn't. Now listen to me, Mr. Grant.'

Her voice had an angry ring in it. 'You *must* do this for your friend's sake.'

'You won't tell me why?'

'I won't. How do I know what folly you would be guilty of? But this I may tell you. If you follow my advice "Goneaway" will win;' then, with a softening voice, 'You said you could trust me.'

Grant was captured. 'And I will, here's my hand on it. But there's the jockey!'

'What is he like?' she asked. 'A swell?'

'Not a bit of it. He's just a decent stable boy. But he's as straight as a rush and rides like a demon. Sloan himself couldn't give him an ounce in a handicap, and he loves "Goneaway" as his father and mother and brothers and sisters all rolled into one. He'll never pull him without knowing what for.'

'Could I see him with you?'

'Now?'

'Now.'

'I would like it of all things. He's most likely in the stable. He eats, drinks, smokes, and sleeps in "Goneaway's" loose box, talking to the horse half the time.'

They heard the muttering of a voice as they came to the door of 'Goneaway's' stable. 'We'll take the puff out of Froggy, won't we, old man,' said the shrill voice, as Grant lifted the latch.

At the click of the latch the boy turned and faced them, so quickly that the up-turned stable bucket on which he was sitting toppled over with a crash. But his hand went up to his cap when he saw who they were.

He stood before them, lean, and light and tough as a lath; a stolid, honest-looking lad, with red hair, and round, wide-open, light blue eyes, so light that you could barely tell where the white left off and the blue began.

'Ned,' said Grant abruptly, eager to get the thing over, 'I've come to change my instructions. You let "Jumping Frog" make the running, wait on him until the run home, and then——'

The boy flushed, and his china blue eyes blinked.

'Ye want me to pull the horse. Then I'm d——d if I will. It's a blooming plant.'

'Why, you infernal young cub,' shouted Grant in a rage, swinging up his golf stick.

But Dora held his arm.

'Don't!' she whispered, 'it's all right. I like the boy the better for this. Now, Ned, listen to me. It's no plant. We mean "Gone-away" to win.' She stroked the sleek neck of the handsome chestnut, who whinnied and danced a figure step in his litter from sheer lightheartedness. 'I've got a thousand pounds on him myself at evens. Mr. Grant will have five thousand before night if he takes my advice, and put you on for five hundred. It will cost him nothing, for the race is a sure thing if you'll only obey orders.'

'But I can't, Miss,' pleaded the lad. 'The horse goes off like a gun; there's no stopping him at first.'

'All right then. Give him his head at the start. But take second place as soon as you can.'

'I'll do it, Miss,' said the lad, with a glance of admiration at her bright face and trim figure, 'I'll do it, if I have to wrench my blooming arms out of the sockets.'

The excitement was intense on the morning of the race, for every one of the fifty guests had betted heavily. A royal personage had intimated that he would be pleased by an invitation, and at Hernshaw's instance had put his money, a good deal of it, on Jumping Frog. There were no bookmakers, and Archie Grant had the honour of taking his Royal Highness at evens. The grand stand was packed half an hour before the race. Dora stood at a corner almost opposite the black bullfinch, which she studied through a powerful field glass. Grant and Lord Wellmount, who had got down unexpectedly the night before, were together near the centre of the stand, but by Dora's advice Grant had told him nothing of their suspicions.

Soon the horses flashed by in a preliminary canter. Jumping Frog, a big, raking bay with black points, went with a long, loose stride that devoured the ground. Goneaway was smaller, cleaner built, and more compact. His hide had the colour and gloss of a ripe chestnut, and his stride was the spring of a roebuck.

The course was a clear circle, a little over two miles, the starting post not fifty yards from the winning post.

'Off!'

Dora could see 'Goneaway,' with Ned Carruthers in green and gold, leap to the front. For the first three fields the green and gold drew further and further from the crimson and black. Then the horses came slowly together.

Lord Wellmount dropped his glass. 'The cub's pulling, d——n him,' he snapped out. But Grant did not answer.

Ned Carruthers was tugging at the reins with both hands, and Sam Roper on 'Jumping Frog' crept slowly level in spite of himself. Their silks brushed lightly as they flew the hurdles together. But as they landed, Carruthers jabbed 'Goneaway' viciously in the flank with spurred heel, and at the sting of the steel the fiery chestnut broke away from all control. Again the distance widened between the horses. They are racing now in the field, with the black bullfinch at the end of it; 'Goneaway' in full stride a good three lengths ahead.

'Egad! the horse will win yet, in spite of that cub,' muttered the delighted owner.

Dora's face was ghastly and her teeth clenched, as the thud of flying horses on the sward and the gleam of bright silk came nearer and nearer.

She waved her hand with a frantic gesture to the foremost rider. Ned Carruthers suddenly let the whip drop by the loop at the wrist, gripped the right rein with both hands, and wrenched the horse's head round till his neck took the curve of a bent bow, and 'Goneaway' slid broadside up to the fence, and almost broke into it.

'Jumping Frog' was up in a second afterwards. He rose to his fence beautifully. But half way over he shuddered like a bird shot in mid-air, and came down on the other side a limp heap. Then he stumbled to his feet again and stood shivering, heedless of the spur.

Meanwhile Ned Carruthers whirled his horse round for a short run, bored through the hedge with a scramble, and cantered home an easy winner amid tumultuous cheering.

Sir Warner Hernshaw stormed; the placid mask had fallen off, for he was terribly hard hit.

'It's a swindle,' he growled out. 'I'm d——d if I pay!'

'What the devil do you mean, sir?' cried Lord Wellmount angrily.

But Dora Myrl quietly interposed.

'Before this goes further, Sir Warner,' she said, 'I'd like a word or two with you.' He

looked into the clear, steady grey eyes, in which there was now no trace of the arch gaiety that charmed him. Then for the first time he recognised the kind of woman he had to deal with, and guessed, too, by whom he had been checkmated.

'There *has* been foul play, Sir Warner,' Dora said quietly, as they walked together out of hearing of the others, 'but the foul play has been your own. Don't wriggle so and don't curse. I can tell you precisely how the thing was done. The electric generator was worked at your shooting lodge by your good friend Mr. Shore, who hitched it on to the telegraph wire. A tubing of gutta-percha tissue, with copper buckshot inside of it, was run through the thick branches of the black-thorn, and isolated in a bottle at the far end. The first horse through the fence broke the tubing, scattered the buckshot, made the connection, and got I don't know how many volts of electri-city through his body. It was a neat trap, Sir Warner, but it caught the wrong bird this time. "You aimed at the pigeon and shot the crow." There's no use making a fuss. You've got to pay up or own up, whichever you choose.'

Sir Warner paid up.

VI

THE CLUE

'How could you do such a thing, Pussie?'

'Oh! don't ask me, Dora,' the girl sobbed, showing her tear-stained face from amongst the cushions of the sofa in which it had been buried. 'I was wretched and mad, I suppose.'

'But you must tell me everything about it before I can even try to help you.'

'Well, it was this way. I'd been dancing all the night with Sir Charles Phillimore. He quite fascinated me—you know how all the girls run after him—and that night he had eyes only for me, and I was flattered out of my wits. Jem was standing in a corner watching us all the night, and I took a wicked delight in trying how jealous I could make him. But I was startled, I can tell you, for I didn't expect it in the least, when Sir Charles suddenly put his arm round my waist in the conservatory and kissed

me and asked me to be his wife, just as if there was no possible answer but "Yes."

'I was sorely tempted, Dora—I must tell you all my wickedness—to break my engagement with Jem and accept him. But it was only for the tiniest little bit of a minute.

'Then I said "No," very stiff and dignified, and asked him how dare he take such a liberty. But he only laughed at me, and said he would coax me to say "Yes" by and by; and I was so afraid he would begin then and there that I ran away and got back to the ball-room alone.

'You may be sure I was feeling very good and self devoted, and a little cross perhaps as well, when I met Jem in that same conservatory. So when he began scolding me I couldn't stand it for a minute. I gave him back more than he brought, and broke off our engagement right away. We had broken it off three times before and patched it up again, so that didn't matter much. But Jem was real nasty about it. He swore I was "a coquette to my finger tips." "You don't care one straw," he growled, "for that old ass Sir Charles, any more than you do for me. But it amuses you to play with him and break his heart."'

'Break whose heart?' asked Dora smiling.

'Sir Charles Phillimore's, of course.'

'Oh! go on with your fairy tale, Puss.'

'Don't be cruel, Dora, it is not a fairy tale; it is a matter of life and death to me. I'll try to tell you how it came about. I was just fit to be tied when Jem said this, and I thought of poor Sir Charles all the way home in the carriage, breaking his heart for the love of me. I wrote that very night and slipped out myself —wasn't that awful?—with my ball dress on and my dressing gown over it, to post the letter round the corner.'

'But what was in the letter, Pussie?'

'Oh! I couldn't tell you what was in it. I was mad when I wrote it. It was full of pity and love and all that sort of nonsense. All I know is that I called him "dearest Sir Charles" three times, and actually mentioned that kiss as if I was glad to have got it—though I wasn't a bit—and said I had never loved and would never love anyone but him, though all the time I was really thinking of poor Jem. I was mad when I wrote it, I tell you; quite mad!'

'You don't seem to have been specially sane!' Dora assented judicially.

'I was sorry, of course, next morning,' the girl went on hurriedly. 'I thought I would have

died with shame when I woke up and remembered what I had written. I believe I blushed all over in my bed at the very thought of it. Then I wrote a second note to Sir Charles, saying the first was all a mistake, and asking him to return it at once. But he wrote back that he liked the first best, so he sent back the second and was trying to forget what was in it.'

'I made it up with Jem of course; having got him to ask my pardon, I forgave him—I don't exactly know for what. But we are to be married in a month. Still that man Sir Charles refuses to give up my note and threatens all sorts of things.'

'What sort of things?'

'I went myself to his rooms. I was afraid of my life that Jem would hear of it, but I went to try to coax the note out of Sir Charles. He made belief that he thought I was coming to make up "one little lovers' quarrel" as he called it, and he was disgustingly gushing. But not a scrap of the note would he give. "Don't be cruel," he whimpered, "it's the dearest possession I have upon earth." I went so far, Dora, as to offer him another kiss for it—I did actually, but he wouldn't.'

'Take the kiss ?'

'Give the letter. "I will never part with it until your wedding morning," he said, "for I cannot believe, even yet, that you will break your troth to me."

'"Will you promise on your honour to send it to me that morning ?" I asked delighted.

'"No, not to you exactly," he answered slowly, "but to your husband I promise most faithfully," and I saw by his eyes and the little hard lines at the corners of his mouth that he meant it.'

'Oh! Dora, it's awful! that is the only word, awful! Jem is so jealous, and he won't believe I never wrote it or that I wrote it for fun or anything of that kind; there's no use swearing, and he'll never love me again if he once reads that wicked letter.'

She broke out crying once more, not to be consoled. She was little more than a child in spite of her boast of twenty-one years—a pretty, petulant, loving, lovable, spoilt child. But her fear and sorrow were very real to her, and woke Dora's pity. So she patted the curly back of the small head gently, for the flushed face was again hidden in the cushions.

'Don't be a baby, Puss, but just tell me what you want me to do.'

'I want you'—the words came scattered through her sobs—'I want you to coax the letter out of him. He has a good opinion of you. He says you are the brightest and cleverest woman he ever met.'

'I'm sorry for that. It won't be a case of coaxing him, I'm afraid, and I'm sorry he has such a good opinion of me to begin with—it will make the job harder. However, I'll do my best on condition that you won't cry another tear for a fortnight.'

The light-hearted little woman jumped at the condition, and in five minutes she was gossiping gaily about her trousseau as if the obnoxious letter were already in the fire.

'It pains me beyond measure to refuse *you* anything, Miss Myrl,' said Sir Charles Phillimore, when Dora called next day.

'Then why not save yourself immeasurable pain, Sir Charles?' retorted Dora.

'It is impossible, my dear young lady, impossible. You cannot guess how I treasure that sweet loving little note. While there is hope for me I cannot part with it.'

'But there isn't any hope for you. I tell you the girl is in love with Mr. Trevor, and they are engaged to be married in a month.'

'Engaged, not married! Engagements have been broken off.'

'But she tells me that you have threatened even when they are married to ——'

'"Promise" is the word, my dear Miss Myrl, not "threatened." A sense of honour would, of course, forbid me to keep the letter after the young lady's marriage. I have faithfully promised that on her wedding day I will restore it to her husband, and I will most infallibly keep my word.'

He said it with dignity, as though he were really doing the most honourable thing in the world. Sir Charles had what is well called 'an imposing manner,' which went well with his stately figure and handsome face. Still on the right side of middle age, though close to the boundary line, wealthy, clever, generous, and a Society favourite: he might have had his pick of a score of Society beauties. But the little, pretty, saucy, reckless, innocent schoolgirl had captivated his fancy, and he was making a desperate attempt to strengthen the hold on her which her madcap letter had given him. He was most courteous to Dora—a very good parody of the old-fashioned courtesy, with gallantry peeping out through the assump-

tion of homage, but she felt at once that entreaties could not move him.

'Is it no use to appeal to your honour, Sir Charles?' she said despairingly.

'Miss Myrl, I am the guardian of my own honour.'

'Then the post is a sinecure, I'm afraid.'

For the life of her she could not resist the jibe. But Sir Charles put it from him with a wave of his white hand. 'If an enemy had said this,' he murmured reproachfully, 'but *you!*'—there was a world of tenderness in the intonation of the 'you.'

Then Dora determined to play up to the irresistible lady-killer.

'For my sake, then, Sir Charles,' she murmured, with a very creditable imitation of a blush.

'My dear Miss Myrl,' with playful raillery, 'for your sake, even for yours—I must refuse. You are famous as an unraveller of mysteries—a finder out of secrets. It would be crime to rob you of your triumph by tame surrender.'

'Well, will you give me fair play?'

'Fair play and favour. To begin with, I will tell you the letter is in this room and will remain here.'

He glanced round his own large and handsome drawing-room as he spoke. It was full—almost too full—of beautiful and costly furniture. A thousand and one elegant nick-nacks, books, pictures, photos, statues, vases were scattered everywhere on the multitude of tables and cabinets. A velvet pile carpet half an inch deep was on the floor; heavy curtains of brocaded silk and inner curtains of real lace shaded the windows. To look for a needle in a bundle of straw were a simple task in comparison with the attempt to find a letter in such a room.

'You will tell me no more than that, Sir Charles?'

'It would be an insult to your skill, Miss Myrl.'

'But I may come here when I like to look for it?'

'The oftener you come and the longer you stay, Miss Myrl—I had almost said Dora—the more delight you will afford to the most fervent and yet most hopeless of your admirers.'

She could have boxed his ears then and there for tone and look. But she only said, with a fascinating smile, 'I will have a

double inducement to come. I'll find you here, if I don't find the letter. The game begins to-morrow. Take care, Sir Charles, that you do not have too much of me before it is over.'

'That,' he answered, with a low bow and his hand to his heart as he opened the door to let her pass, 'is wholly impossible.'

Dora dressed herself with special care next morning; not the art that conceals art, but rather desiring that the special care should be manifest to the experienced eye of Sir Charles.

For weapon of offence and defence she carried nothing but half a dozen yards or so of the finest silk thread, in colour as near as might be to the prevailing tint of the rich carpet, coiled in a loose clue under her glove.

She so timed her morning visit that she had five minutes to herself in the drawing-room.

She slipped one end of the thread round the leg of the couch on which she sat, and when Sir Charles came in hastily, full of apologies, to greet her, she dexterously dropped the little loose coil into the open pocket of his velvet morning acket.

Her face was full of a smirking triumph.

'Victory! Sir Charles,' she cried as their

hands met, and so surprised him that he forgot the tender squeeze he had intended and stared in blank amazement.

'You don't mean to say that'——

'I don't mean to say one word more: even the criminal is not bound to criminate herself.'

He just caught and stopped himself in the act of glancing round to where the letter lay hidden, and broke into a sudden laugh as a new thought came to him.

'A trick, Miss Myrl!' he cried, 'and a clever trick; you almost caught me. Come now! confess it was a trick?'

'I will confess nothing and deny nothing. If you're pleased, Sir Charles, I'm double pleased, and now good-bye! Yes; I must be off. I only wanted to see you before I left. I thought it only fair when I had done what I came to do to thank you for the chance.'

The note of unaffected triumph in her voice still troubled him. He made no further objection to her going. The seat she had chosen was quite close to the door, and he opened it to let her pass, forgetting his bow in his haste.

She laughed to herself on the stairs as she heard him turn the key in the lock. After

waiting a moment or two, she came back for her card-case, which she had left on the couch.

At the first tap at the door he opened it, in radiant good humour.

'Confess I startled you,' she said as she picked up her card-case; 'you really thought it was gone.'

'I thought you were gone, Miss Myrl; and that grieved me.'

'Well, as you are so kind I will have a look round before I go.'

There, lying on the soft nap of the carpet the fine silk thread was barely visible even to Dora's sharp eyes. The thread lay first from the couch to the door. Then there was a long straight line beyond the centre of the room close to the window opposite an occasional table that stood a little apart from the other furniture. Here the thread took another turn as Sir Charles came back to the door. About a yard or two from the door the end of it had been drawn from his pocket and lay on the carpet.

Dora knew as well as if she had seen him do it that the instant the key was turned in the lock he had walked straight to see if the letter was still safe. The thread drawn from his

pocket as he walked, and catching as it fell in the thick nap of the carpet, marked the direction he took and the spot where he had stood. On or near the table, next the angle where the thread again turned to the door, Dora knew the letter was concealed.

Having marked the spot with her eye by the pattern of the flowers on the carpet, she turned her whole attention to the captivation of Sir Charles.

It was no difficult task. She quickly convinced him or rather helped him to convince himself, that her anxiety about the letter was only a blind, or at most was inspired by a touch of jealousy. They talked on many topics just on the border of love making, with now and then a short incursion into the forbidden land. There was a tantalizing temptation in Dora's eyes that stirred his vanity with the hope of conquest.

'You will have tea before you go, Miss Myrl; now don't refuse a lonely and disconsolate bachelor?'

'On one condition!'

'On any condition you like except'——

'Oh! I know, it's not that; you may keep the silly letter if you can. Mine is a very easy condition, merely that in return you will come

to tea to me to-morrow. You will be all alone, I promise you.'

'Why, that is not a condition, Miss Myrl; it is a recompense.'

'You will come, then? Four o'clock sharp?'

'If I live.'

Then Dora made tea for him with a silver spirit lamp, from a silver caddy, in a silver tea-pot, and poured it into eggshell cups of old Dresden worth a whole shopful of vulgar modern crockery ware.

She was more fascinating than ever, and Sir Charles more fascinated as the visit drew to a close.

When she was gone he lit a meditative cigarette, and, while the fumes of the fine Turkish tobacco ticked his nostrils and soothed his brain, he mused in a superior quizzical humour on the vagaries of his own love fancies.

'She is prettier than the other,' he thought, 'and a hundred times cleverer, and she would come to me if I beckoned with my little finger. But still, the little wild school girl that will kiss you or box your ears as the thought takes her has fast hold of my heart in spite of myself. Dora is the very girl for a brisk flirtation—nothing more. She may be a bit cut up when

all this is over, but she won't break her heart, I dare say. What a pretty name it is! Dickens said that before me, and what a bright lively unsophisticated little girl she is that carries that name. There is a world of humour in the notion of unsophisticated Dora as a lady detective.'

He lit another cigarette, and smoked it slowly to appreciate the subtle humour of the notion at his leisure.

At half-past three o'clock—just five minutes after Sir Charles Phillimore had left to keep his appointment at Dora's flat—Dora drove up to Sir Charles's handsome house in Park Lane.

She was so sorry, she said, that Sir Charles was out. She had an appointment with him at four o'clock, and would wait.

The drawing-room was arranged exactly as the day before; even the thread was still there, though it had been swept into a tangle by the broom of the industrious servant.

Dora walked straight to the table indicated by the clue and began studying it. It was rather large, and loaded with a perplexing assortment of books, photographs, and other knick-knacks. The search was narrowed indeed, but for all that

it promised to be a troublesome search. 'Where shall I begin?'—Dora thought, a little bewildered.

Then suddenly an inspiration came to her.

'What a fool I am!' she cried out loud, 'it is there, of course. That's just where a man of his kind would put it!'

Amongst the knick-knacks on the table was a framed photograph of Sir Charles Phillimore himself in a fancy costume as Don Juan.

Dora's quick fingers had the frame off in a moment and rummaged behind it. She was a woman, and she could not resist a little cry of delight as she found the letter she sought at the back.

But there came an answering cry in a man's voice from the door!

Dora's plans had been well laid. She had even given directions to her servant that when Sir Charles called to tea he was to be kept half an hour waiting. But alas!

> 'The best laid schemes o' mice and men
> Gang aft a-gley,'

and even women have no exemption from mischance.

It happened that a friend met Sir Charles a

few hundred yards from his own door and stopped to speak to him.

In the very strictest confidence Sir Charles mentioned the appointment he was on his way to keep. The friend by an unlucky accident had seen Dora pass a few moments before, and told him so and laughed at him.

Perplexed and annoyed, Sir Charles went straight back to his own house, let himself in with a latchkey, and opened the drawing-room door at the psychological moment to hear Dora's little cry of triumph, and catch her with the unframed photo in one hand and the contested letter in the other.

She flung the photo on the table, and plunged the crumpled letter deep into her pocket as she turned round and faced him.

He locked the door, put the key in his pocket, and greeted her with ironical welcome and surprise. His good humour had come back and with it his courtly manner, self-conceit persuading him that not his good luck but his superior shrewdness had triumphed over the cunning of the lady detective.

'So we have both missed one appointment and both kept it,' he said. 'How fortunate!'

'The game is over, Sir Charles, the stakes

are mine. You are too good a gentleman not to own up and pay up when you lose.'

'Pardon me! Miss Myrl, my trump takes your queen and wins the odd trick.'

She flushed a little at his tone. 'Surely you don't mean'—— she began.

'You know that charming old nursery rhyme?' he blandly interposed:

'Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief,
Taffy came to my house and stole a rib of beef;
I went to Taffy's house, Taffy was from home,
Taffy came to my house and stole a marrow bone.'

'I must trouble you for that marrow bone, Miss Myrl.'

'Is that fair play, Sir Charles?'

'All's fair in love and war, Miss Myrl, and 'pon my word I'm not sure yet whether it is love or war between us.'

'Do you really mean that you will take the letter from me by force?' she asked. Her coolness had come back to her, and she smiled so prettily that the fatuous notion crossed his mind that she enjoyed the prospect.

'A gentle force, a tender violence,' he replied.

'But if I cry out?'

'You would not do anything so foolish and so useless.'

'Perhaps not, but all the same I point blank refuse to give back the letter that I have fairly won.'

'I will give you one minute more to consider the question, Miss Myrl, just while I count sixty slowly. One, two, three, four, five!'

She took a vesta wax match—a big one—from the silver match box at her chatelaine and lit it.

Sir Charles chuckled to himself: 'She must bring the letter out of her pocket to burn it,' he thought, 'that is my chance. She is not so shrewd as I thought.'

'Forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty!'

Dora held the match head down, the wax melted and it flamed up in a fierce blaze. She took a step close to the window.

'Fifty-eight, fifty-nine, sixty!'

With a jerk of her wrist she sent the blazing match amid the light lace curtains.

They caught and flared in sudden flame.

Sir Charles rushed to extinguish the blaze!

In an instant Dora tore the letter to bits, sent the bits fluttering into the heart of the red glare, where they shrivelled and vanished.

Then she turned, cool and prompt, to help Sir Charles: 'Catch the silk curtains,' she cried, 'jerk down the pole. Now, both together!'

The pole came down with a crash and they easily smothered out the fire, which was after all a mere flimsy blaze that had not caught the silk or woodwork.

For a moment they stood regarding each other comically through the smoke.

Then Sir Charles Phillimore bowed politely: 'Game to you, Miss Myrl,' he said, 'well won!'

VII

A RAILWAY RACE

It was a marvellous triumph!

'Glorious! Glorious!' they whispered one to another in the crowded Playgoers' Theatre. 'Even she never played like this before.'

Every time Ophelia appeared on the stage there was a universal roar of applause which ceased in profoundest silence as she spoke. It was indeed a miracle of acting—reality could not be more real. Ophelia herself, as she came warm with life from the brain and heart of the great Master, lived before the audience. The charming girlish Ophelia of the early scenes, whose happy love, warm in her gay young heart, the chilling counsels of father and brother could not kill, changed before their eyes to the womanly passionate, broken-hearted Ophelia whom Hamlet had abandoned. The hopeless sorrow in her voice went straight to Dora Myrl's

heart; she leant her face down on her hands, and the tears forced their way between her fingers as she listened:

'And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That suck'd the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
Like sweet bells jangled, out of time and harsh;
That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy: O, woe is me,
To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!'

In the mad scenes Ophelia was pitiful beyond words—sympathy in its intensity grew to pain. Her reason seemed to come and go like light and shade upon deep still water, in those snatches of wild song. But the grief that crazed her brain showed vaguely through all her changing moods.

Dora could not stand the strain on her heart-strings, so when at last Ophelia passed from the stage, in order to break the illusion, even while the whole theatre still thundered with applause, she stepped unobserved to the stage entrance, where she was well known, and sent in her card to her friend Miss Nina Lovell. She knew that Nina resolutely refused to answer the calls which would bring Ophelia back from her

grave, or the ghost of Hamlet's father from 'sulphurous and tormenting flame,' before the curtain ; so she was certain to find her in her dressing room. Following an attendant down dark, narrow, crooked passages at the back of the gorgeous stage, round the coils and angles of slips and scenery, through groups of supers at the wings, Dora caught a sudden glimpse in a looking-glass that hung askew on one of the side scenes of a face that was like the face of a fiend's as Dante might conceive it. There was a deadly pitiless cruelty in the half-closed eyes and sneering lips that struck a chill to her heart. The next moment at a turn of the narrow passage she came upon handsome debonnaire Dick Dulcimer, the most light-hearted and popular man in all London.

'Wasn't she just splendid, Miss Myrl?' he cried impulsively. 'Cousin Tom is a lucky dog. I'm doing my best to cut him out, though.'

He looked as if he could cut any fellow out with any girl at the moment, he was so light-hearted and handsome.

'I'm here to-night on the job,' he went on gaily, while he pressed Dora's hand with playful tenderness, 'but it's no use so far. She turned me out the moment I tried love making.

It's faithful till death and all that sort of thing with her. She is fonder of Tom than Ophelia was of Hamlet. Still, I don't despair; while there's life there's hope, but she has just refused me for the seventeenth time. "Good-bye, Mr. Dulcimer," she said. "Au revoir, Nina," I answered. I heard her laughing in spite of herself as I went out, and it will be "Au revoir," you'll see.'

So, with a gay laugh over his shoulder, he vanished into the darkness.

Dora found her friend in the dressing room, still in the wild costume of the mad Ophelia with the flowers trailing through her dishevelled hair and over her dress.

'Welcome! my dear; sit down and have a cup of tea; it's just making,' cried Ophelia gaily. 'I'm glad you came, I was vexed.'

Dora felt it a little incongruous to be on those pleasant terms with the crazed daughter of Polonius, who had wrung her very heart strings a moment before.

'Thanks!' she said, 'I will be glad to have a cup of tea; I want it after what you have made me go through.'

'Did I though, really; was I good?' with the innocent delight of a child.

'Good is a weak wishy-washy word; you were heartrending, my dear!'

'I'm glad. It was the last time; they don't know out there'—she nodded her head towards the front, where the applause came to them like muffled thunder, from the theatre—'but they won't see me again ever.'

'I'm sorry——'

'You won't be sorry when you know the rest.'

'I suppose that's why you say you are vexed.'

'No, it wasn't, Miss Wiseacre; I'm glad of that, and I wasn't vexed really. I never am for more than half a minute at a time. It was that Dick Dulcimer, he gets on my nerves; I cannot tell whether to be annoyed or amused at him. But I don't want to talk of him now. Prepare for a shock, Dora! I'm to be married in a fortnight!'

'Oh!' was the full extent of Dora's reply. Then she supplemented it by another monosyllable, 'Tom?'

'Why, certainly; who else should it be?'

'I congratulate you with my whole heart and him with a heart and a half,' and she kissed her congratulations.

'Oh! I'm the happiest girl in the wide world. There, take your tea—is it sweet enough? a little more cream?—and I'll tell you all about it. His father came to—Hark! they're burying me outside, you know. I'm on the bier and they want me to get up and bow before I'm put in my grave. Where was I? Oh! yes.'

'Not on your bier, I'm glad to say.'

'Don't be frivolous. You remember I told you that I told Tom I would never marry him without his father's full consent. I thought that was the end of it, and I wouldn't even let him come see me—at home I mean. Of course I couldn't help him paying his money and coming to the theatre like everyone else.'

'Like anyone else! Oh Nina!'

'He was there in the same stall every night. There was a nice old gentleman with him *that* night who applauded almost as much as Tom himself. I got a card when I went to my dressing room. My heart stopped beating when I read the name: "The Earl of Mordor," Tom's father. Oh! Dora, he was charming. I told Tom afterwards it was lucky for him I had not met his father first. He—the father, not Tom—was full of old-fashioned

politeness. If I were a Duchess he could not have been more deferential. "I come as an ambassador for my son," he said; "he tells me you have been cruel to him on my account. Will you be kind to him on my account, Miss Lovell?"

'"Then he has your consent?" I faltered out. I was as nervous as a school-girl.'

'"Don't say my consent; my very warm approval. You will forgive my frankness. I was nervous when he told me first until I saw you and heard you. I thought it was a boy's foolish passion, like——"

'"Like young Pendennis?"

'"You're a lover of Thackeray, that's another bond between us. Let me confess I did think of Pendennis."

'"I hope I'm not like the Fotheringay?"

'"And I hope I'm not like Major Pendennis?"

'"You are like Colonel Newcome," I answered impetuously, and Dora, I blush to think of it, I just threw my arms round him and kissed him just as I often thought I'd like to do to Colonel Newcome if he were alive.

'When I looked up, there was Tom standing at the door grinning. "My turn next," he said.

'That is the way it was all settled. Two days after I was introduced to Tom's brother, the Hon. Bill, who is at school at Rugby, and his sister "Vi," who has just come out and wants to go in again she says. She and I are the best of friends. "I wish you could pass me over your place on the stage, my dear, when you are done with it," she said. "If I could play like you, I wouldn't give it up for fifty foolish Toms."

'They are all coming up from Hazeldean next week, and I'm to be married the week after. Oh! Dora'—she ended as she began—'I'm the happiest girl in the world.'

To prove it she burst out crying.

Dora murmured her congratulations and consolations as in duty bound, but all the time a half-conscious thought away in the back of her head was busy with Dick Dulcimer, the man that got on Nina's nerves.

Then they talked trousseau for a while.

'But about Dick Dulcimer?' said Dora suddenly, apropos of nothing, with her keen eyes fixed on her friend's face.

'Oh! don't talk any more of him, I hate him. That's nonsense, of course. He's Tom's cousin and greatest friend, and no one could

really hate him, he is always so bright and pleasant. But still——'

Nina's wonderful eyes darkened as limpid water darkens when a shadow goes over the sun, and there was a vague trouble in her sweet voice.

'But still, what?' Dora prompted.

'I cannot get myself to trust him. He makes love to me; half joke, whole earnest; yet so playfully that I haven't a chance to be vexed. Once I was silly enough to tell Tom, but he only laughed at me. "I know all about it," he said. "Dick has given me fair warning he means to cut me out. After that Dick and I had a drink together, and he gave me the straight tip for the Oaks—twenty to one. I've brought you the result in diamonds; you may thank Dick for them." The next time I met Dick, he laughed too. "So you told Tom," he said, "and he thinks it a good joke. Poor old Tom, he is as keen sighted as an owl in the daylight. But it is no joke; it is as serious, my pretty Nina, as anything in this funny old world can be."

'To-night he was different at first, and he spoke so nicely about Tom that I liked him better than ever I liked him before, and I told

him of our marriage. All at once the smile fell from his lips and eyes as I've seen a mask fall off. But he brightened again instantly and laughed so gaily that I laughed with him. "So you want to be Lady Mordor," he said, "and so you shall. Will you answer me one question?"

'"Is it the same old question?"

'"Not quite. Do you think you could have cared for me if there had been no Tom? There, that will do; don't speak! I'll take your blush for an answer." He looked at me hungrily, as if he'd like to snatch me up in his arms and kiss me. You know the look, Dora, and then I got angry and turned him out of my room.

'He was quite cool about it. "Oh! I'll come back all right," he said. "Journeys end in lovers meeting."

'"Not always," I cried, hardly knowing what I was saying.

'"No, not always," he answered strangely over his shoulder as he went out—"Quite right, Nina, not always," and he strolled off humming a tune.'

Dora listened intently, her lips tightly closed, her eyes shining brightly, and her pretty forehead puckered into a frown.

'Why don't you laugh!' cried Nina im-

patiently, 'I tell you all my foolish fancies on purpose for you to laugh me out of them.'

'All?' said Dora.

Nina shivered and pouted. 'Happiness has made me nervous,' she said hesitatingly, 'it's more like a wicked dream than anything else. But I have a kind of presentiment, I suppose you would call it. As Tom says, there has been an epidemic of accidents in his family lately. It's not a year ago since his eldest brother Henry shot himself, out pheasant shooting. Dick Dulcimer was with him at the time, and almost lost his reason, they say, from the shock. Since then Tom has had two narrow escapes—once boating and once riding. He insists that Dick Dulcimer saved his life on both occasions, but I never could get the story clearly from him. Jem—the boy—was nearly poisoned by a mistake of his medicine, and 'Vi' almost burned to death by her ball dress taking fire; providentially, they both escaped without injury. About a month ago Lord Mordor was attacked by a mad dog that came upon the lawn—no one knew from where. It was running at him open-mouthed, not a dozen yards off, when the keeper shot it. But of course all this has nothing to do with Mr. Dulcimer.'

Of course not,' assented Dora. 'What is Mr. Dulcimer?'

A very handsome, agreeable man,' answered Nina laughing. She seemed to have got her troubles off her mind by the mere telling of them.

'I know all that. But what does he do for his living?'

'Oh! he is something in the City, and Tom says he is very smart "on 'Change," though you'd never think it.'

'Oh! yes, I would think it. Where does he live?'

'He has a flat—Waltham Terrace, West; I forget the number.'

'Oh! I'll have no trouble finding that out.'

Nina looked at her with bright eyes brimming over with fun.

'How queerly you talk, Dora; you have not fallen in love with my gay Lothario-Dick Dulcimer, have you? How serious you look, my dear. I'm afraid it's a very bad case.'

'Yes,' said Dora softly, as she joined in her friend's laughter, 'I'm afraid it's a very bad case.'

Next day there was a volunteer in the District Messenger Brigade who wore the

uniform though he had never been regularly enlisted. A nice looking lazy young lad who loitered down Waltham Terrace when Dick Dulcimer came out. As Dick hailed a hansom the messenger passed so close at the moment that he could not help overhearing the address in the City. For the rest of the day that messenger boy might be seen unobtrusively coming and going in the vicinity of Dick Dulcimer's offices, and out of his comely, stolid stupid face, under drooping eyelids, looked the keen eyes of Dora Myrl, which nothing escaped.

At about three o'clock she had the reward of her vigilance.

A big man, tall and square-shouldered, walked briskly down the pavement and turned sharply into Mr. Dulcimer's office, as though by appointment.

Dora caught but one glimpse of the dark strong face, with square protruding chin and beak like a hawk's. But it was enough. When she had last seen him he had worn a full beard and whiskers; now he was clean shaved, but she knew him instantly as Filox Cranshaw, one of the cleverest and most dangerous desperados in London. She had been on his track for a

dynamite outrage—the front of a jeweller's shop blown in at night; the policeman on duty killed and the place plundered. At the time she convinced herself that Cranshaw was guilty, but had failed to find evidence against him. Her suspicion of Dick Dulcimer hardened to a certainty when she saw this man pass familiarly into his office. They were an hour together; Dora was all the time devoured with impatience.

At last she came briskly up to the door with a message—as she said—for Mr. Dulcimer. She wouldn't give the letter to the clerk; she was told, she said, to put it into the hands of the gentleman himself.

It would be easy, she thought, when Dick appeared to fumble in her pocket for the letter and pretend she lost it. Then a report at headquarters wouldn't hurt. But she was not put to that.

Dick Dulcimer's voice from within told the clerk he was not to be disturbed. Instigated by the messenger, the clerk knocked again. Mr. Dulcimer put his head out to tell him to go to the devil. Through the half open door Dora could see that the two men had been seated at a table on which there was a large

outline map and a Bradshaw railway guide. That was all.

After that there was nothing for it but to watch and wait. In half an hour more they came out together and walked to a telegraph station down a back street, about a mile or so from the office.

'It's a quiet place,' said Cranshaw. 'I'll send you a wire here on Wednesday afternoon when the job is done.'

'Wait a second,' answered Dulcimer, 'while we are here I may as well do a stroke of business which will help to pay our expenses.'

He took a form from the counter and wrote: 'Burdock, Stock Broker, Throgmorton St. Sell for my account five thousand London South-Westerns. Richard Dulcimer.'

A messenger boy, apparently waiting for a despatch, read the telegram over his shoulder.

This was Monday. On Tuesday Dick Dulcimer walked to the office in the gayest of gay humours, humming an opera tune, a bunch of sweet smelling spring violets in his button-hole. He was a refreshing figure to meet, and many a pretty girl dropped her eyelids demurely after one quick look into those wide open

smiling blue eyes, and cast a shy look after the trim figure as it passed.

All day Dora watched him like a cat at a mousehole, but nothing came of it.

Early in the afternoon of Wednesday he called at the telegraph office, and seemed a little disappointed there was no message for him.

At six he came again. This time in reply to his question the clerk handed him a russet envelope. He tore it open impatiently and read the message under the gas lamp in the office, puzzling over it a little as though the writing was illegible. But he got it all right, at last, and his face brightened. Crumpling the message and envelope together into his pocket, he left the office with a brisk step. Just outside the door he seemed to change his mind. He drew the crumpled ball of paper from his pocket and tore it into pieces, which he scattered like a small pink snow storm. Then, without turning his head, he walked briskly round the corner.

The air was still and the pavement greasy; the bits of paper rested where they fell without a flutter. It happened there was in the quiet street at the moment only one other person—a District Company's messenger.

He did a very queer thing. Mr. Dulcimer's back had no sooner disappeared round the corner than that district messenger was down on his knees on the greasy pavement. He lightly and dexterously swept the fragments of paper into his handkerchief, picking up a few bits that had dropped into the kennel. Then, running down the street the opposite direction to that Mr. Dulcimer had taken, he jumped into a hansom, gave the driver Dora Myrl's address, with a promise of double fare if he drove quickly.

With a bottle of gum, a sheet of foolscap, and a camel's hair brush Dora had no difficulty in piecing the tattered telegram. This is what she read on it :

U I F K P C E P O F T M F F Q F S D M B N Q F E
P O U I F M J O F C F U X F F O U I F F E E J T D P
N C F B O E U I F F W F S I B N T U B U J P O T N B E F
D F S U B J O U I B U U I F X I P M F N P S E P S Q B S U Z
M F B W F C Z U I F O J H I U N B J M B O E B S S J W F
B U P V S U F S N J O V T B C P V U P O F G P S U Z D P
O H S B U V M B U F Z P V S M P S E T I J Q.

It was a cypher, of course, but whether simple or complex was a vital question. Dora had given much time to cypher deciphering

and there were few she could not unravel—in time. But now she had a shrewd suspicion there was no time to spare; that life and death hung upon her speed. It was probable, she thought, that the cypher before her was of the simplest kind, merely meant to elude the telegraph clerks by the substitution of letters, each letter having always the same value. It was worth trying anyway, as the test was so easy.

In any writing of that length 'E' is sure to be the most frequently recurring. This is the first rudiment of the art.

A single glance at the telegram showed her, even without counting, that 'F' was the letter most frequently repeated. She assumed that 'F' stood for 'E' in the cypher. It was morally certain, as she knew, that the word 'the' would recur several times. Glancing over the telegram she found the combination 'U I F' frequently recurring. The word 'the' thus indicated gave her, not merely letters, but also the beginning and ending of a word whenever it occurred. At its fifth recurrence she found in the word, or end of a word, before it the combination U I B U. But she already knew that U=T and I=H. Transcribing the combination to this extent she got 'thbt,' 'B' being the only substituted letter. It was at once plain that the word was 'that,'

and so another letter, B=A, was added to the correct vocabulary. She now set them out in a table for quick reference :

B=A
U=T
I=H
F=E

A glance at the table revealed the whole clue. She thought herself blind that she had not guessed it before. For each letter the next in order in the alphabet was substituted, B for A and C for B and D for C, and so on to the end.

With the clue in her hand the infamous telegram became instantly clear :

'*The job done. Sleeper clamped on the line between the Eddiscombe and the Everham stations. Made certain that the whole Mordor party leave by the night mail and arrive at our terminus about one forty. Congratulate your lordship.*'

She had not an instant's doubt of its meaning. She knew that Lord Mordor and his son and daughter were coming to town by the London South-Eastern line, and she knew the 'terminus' those devils had prepared—not for

them alone, but for the whole trainful of passengers.

Instantly every faculty of mind and body was on the alert to avert the hellish outrage. In the half-hour's rapid drive to the station of the London South-Eastern line her plan was formed.

'It cannot be done, Miss Myrl,' said the superintendent, 'it really cannot. It is without precedent. I should at least have the authority of the traffic manager and he is——'

'But the men will do it if you order?'

'I believe so, but——'

'There must be no "buts," Mr. Merton; remember what the stake is! Have you wired to Everham Station?'

Even as she spoke a boy entered with the answer. It was very short: 'Cannot get through, wires cut.'

'I knew it, I knew it!' cried Dora passionately. 'While we stand here doing nothing, a trainful of human beings is rushing straight to destruction. I have told you how to save them! There is not a second to spare, and you keep talking of the company's rules and bye-laws. Good bye! I'll appeal to the men; it's the last chance.'

Her passion captured the superintendent. He was a sedate young man with mutton chop whiskers that showed black against his white face, but his eyes and lips were steady.

'Rules be d——d,' he said, 'I'll do it!'

There were a number of tubes with mouthpieces in his room close to the chimney-piece. He spoke a few words sharply through two of them.

'I have ordered them to get ready "The Pioneer," the fastest engine on the line, and I have sent for two men, a stoker and engine driver, who—Oh! come in!'

Two men came in, a big man and a little man, in answer to this intimation. The big man was fresh and rosy from a recent scrubbing, and his heightened colour made his blue eyes seem bluer. The little man was dressed from head to foot in grease and smut. His high cheek bones were shiny black knobs. Small keen grey eyes and large ivory white teeth were the only touch of colour in his face. But he was quite at his ease, and nodded almost patronizingly to the station master.

'I want you, O'Brien, you and McClintock, on a dangerous job!'

'We're ready, sir,' said the big man.

'This lady has brought the news there is an attempt to wreck the night mail between Everham and Eddiscombe. I'm sending "The Pioneer" down on the same rails to warn and stop her. I want you to drive and McClintock to stoke; will you go?'

'In course I'll go,' said the Irishman, almost angry at the question. 'Do you think I'd let the craturs go to smash without a try to save them!'

'What do you say, McClintock?'

'Weel, I dinna say aye and I dinna say naw. "The Pioneer" will be five meenits and maybe mair getten' up steam. There's time to think ower the job a bit. There wull be a reward likely for someone out of this, Meester Merton?'

'If the train is saved, I think I can promise you two men a hundred pounds!'

'Each?' asked McClintock.

'Each,' answered the other.

'Or one's widows maybe in case——'

'Yes, or your widows!'

'An ye waudn't mind putten' it in writin'?'

The station master scribbled a few words hastily, which McClintock put away carefully in a pocket in the folded dirt of his jacket.

'Ye're too impeetuous, young man!' he said to the station master. 'I was bund to gae the trip if there were ne'er a bawbee to be got of it. Ye're hastiness has cost the coompany twa hoondred punds; naw less! Hark! there's "The Pioneer." I ken the squeal of her!'

The superintendent's office in which they were opened on the platform. Merton and O'Brien flung the door open, and started to run. Dora followed, but McClintock laid a grimy hand on the sleeve of her grey dress. She keeps that dress yet for the sake of the five grimy stains on the sleeve.

'All in guid time, ma lass,' he said. 'It will take her five meenits muir to get her steam oop!'

A sudden impulse made Dora look at her watch. She could hardly realise that time had gone so fast. It was a quarter to eleven.

'How far is it to Everham Station?' she asked McClintock as they walked rapidly down the platform together.

'Aboot feefty miles.'

'It's nearer than Eddiscombe—is it not?'

'It's a guid seven miles nearer!'

She groaned in spirit.

At eleven forty the night mail would be at

the fatal 'terminus,' and they were fifty miles away waiting for an engine.

But no time was lost now. There were a number of men busy about 'The Pioneer.' They had fitted her with a huge head light flaring red, and were hurling coal into her furnace. McClintock jumped on board at once and took charge. The other three—Dora, Merton, and O'Brien—waited, boiling over with impatience.

The flames crackled and roared in the glowing furnace, and the great engine purred and quivered as the steam mounted in her boiler. The steam whistle yelled again as McClintock touched it. O'Brien jumped in, and the two other men jumped out.

'Good bye!' Dora and Merton said together, and then their feet met on the step of the tender.

'Surely you're not going!' they began again together, but they stopped short as they looked in each other's eyes, and Mr. Merton gravely handed Dora into the tender, and stepped in after her. At the same moment the engine began to slide out of the station, getting up speed as it went. Dora came close to where O'Brien stood with his hand on the lever.

'It's ten minutes to eleven,' she said, 'you have forty-five minutes to do fifty miles!'

'We'll do it, Miss; never you fear,' was the confident reply. Then he pressed the lever, and the engine seemed to answer with a bound. Through the long suburbs they fled, with rows of houses with lights in the windows racing and twisting on either side. They broke abruptly from the city out into the open country. The red light showed far ahead in waves and flashed, and the angry wind whistled and howled as they tore through a hurricane. Dora peered for a moment round the iron shelter, and the tears streamed from her eyes, and the breath was driven back by the wind into her labouring lungs.

Meanwhile McClintock, with black arms bared and the black sweat streaming down his face, shovelled the coal into the furnace. In an instant, as they touched the fiery glow, the big black blocks crackled, broke into flames, and grew crimson to the core.

The steam puffed through the funnel and hissed through the safety valves, and still the engine flew. Wheels, and cranks, and pistons made clanging rhythm through the silent night. 'Hurry on! Hurry on! Death is before you!'

Hurry on! Hurry on! Death is before you;' they rang incessantly in Dora's ears. Down long grades they rushed without a touch of the brake, and round clean curves, whirling, as it were, on the outer edge, with the further wheels clean lifted from the rails.

Twice with a shrieking of the whistle they flew past long trains, leaving them, as it were, standing, and Dora caught the gleam of light, and a wavering glimpse of white faces and staring eyes as they passed. Into stations and out again they went clanging, with never a halt, so that the lamps and the lighted rooms, and the frightened people on the platforms—red as blood in the glaring head-light—were no more than the sudden picture of a lightning's flash, swallowed instantly in the darkness. So the miles of rails slid backwards under those flying wheels, and the fatal terminus came on.

'Everham!' the driver yelled in Dora's ear as they flashed through a station, and there was a sudden slackening of speed.

'We've done it in forty-four,' he said, with a glance at his watch, 'how now, Miss?' His right hand was still on the lever, but the engine had slowed more and more. Instinctively he took his instructions from her. At the name of

the station there came upon Dora a sickening sense of danger. Hitherto she had been absorbed by a mad desire to get there in time. Now that they were there, terror gripped her heart. Somewhere between the Eddiscombe and Everham station the death trap was laid. If they went forward now, at any moment they might go crashing into the obstruction.

They had slackened speed on a waving curve of the line that ran through a valley, where they could neither see nor be seen a hundred yards ahead.

'What's after this?' she asked, with her lips close to the driver's ear. She pointed forward, and he guessed her meaning.

'There's a mile or so of this corkscrew cutting,' he answered, 'then a long, straight, down grade; the longest on the line.'

'Then rush the curve!' she said, 'we must chance it.'

Without a moment's hesitation O'Brien's big hand pressed the lever, and the engine leaped forward again like a wild horse spurred, and went crashing at a mad speed through the deep cutting of rough stone. It was a long moment of agony that seemed an hour. Their breath was pent tight in their bursting lungs; every nerve and muscle was strained tense in

horrible expectation. At any second the fatal crash might come. All at once the high walls of the long cutting from which the red light flashed and flickered seemed to melt into the wide night air, and at the same moment the engine came up with a jar, and hung snorting and shivering on her brakes.

'Look!' said the driver.

The hurricane had ceased like magic, and Dora, a little stunned by the sudden calm and silence, looked over the iron curtain of the engine, far away into the holy, starlit night. Down the slope the bright rails ran on the edge of a high embankment into the distant valley. She could see them dwindling to mere threads of light in the distance.

'We can do no more, Miss,' the engine-driver said, 'they can see our red light a good three miles off. If they turn the far curve safely, they are safe.'

Plainly they could do no more. Their risk was the train's risk now. If they struck the hope of warning it was gone. So they waited trembling, their red light flaming and their steam whistle shrieking a wild warning into the darkness of the night.

The ordeal was brief. They were not five

minutes on the watch before Dora's keen eyes caught a speck of moving light far down in the valley. O'Brien saw it almost at the same instant.

'The night express!' he gasped out, 'safe so far; let her rip, Jim!'—and the steam whistle yelled like ten thousand demons.

The distant light wavered and stood still, and a steam whistle answered in the distance.

O'Brien broke into a cheer that sounded like a sob.

'She is safe!' he cried, 'she won't stir a step now till we crawl down to her at our aise.' The engine trembled into a snail like motion as he spoke.

In the sudden reaction the thought flashed into Dora's mind, 'What if it is all a cruel jest!' But before the thought could take shape the engine was brought up with a sudden jolt that jarred her nerves.

O'Brien instantly climbed over the side. He found the front wheels against a great beam of wood clamped with iron holdfasts to the rails at a point where the line ran along the steepest ridge, and a fall of sixty feet, at least, made destruction sure.

The big Irishman was on his knees beside the engine tugging at the beam.

'May speedy damnation light on their souls who planned this devil's job!' he said solemnly as in prayer—and instinctively three voices from the engine answered, 'Amen.'

The day but one afterwards the following paragraph appeared in the evening papers under a sensational heading:

'Inexplicable Outrage

'This afternoon as Mr. Richard Warnham Dulcimer was walking to his office in the city, he was suddenly accosted by a well-dressed man who shouted: "D——n you for a white-livered skunk, you've blown the gaff and put the police upon me. But I'll pay you out!' There was a crowd around at the time. But before a hand could be raised, the madman—for so we must suppose him—drew a revolver and shot the unfortunate gentleman through the heart. Instantly he put the revolver barrel between his own lips and fired again. The bullet broke a hole through the roof of his skull and scattered his brains on the pavement. No motive can be suggested for the outrage. The murdered gentleman—who was a nephew of Lord Mordor, with whom he was on most friendly terms—was universally beloved for his genial temper and kindness of heart.'

VIII

THE PAUPER'S LEGACY

For a while she was stunned and bewildered at the change. No wonder. One week she was a petted and pampered heiress, the only daughter of a reputed millionaire; the next a great commercial crisis carried off fortune and father together, and left her a penniless orphan. It is but fair to the dead man's name to say that there was no dishonour in the disaster. Poverty, but not disgrace, was his daughter's heritage.

There are some natures that adversity tests and tempers, as the cold sting of the ice water tempers the steel.

Maggie Norris was not one to sit down with idle hands in her lap to lament misfortune. This slight, pretty, brown-eyed, brown-haired girl had more than the courage of a man. Grief, sudden and sharp as it had been, could

not stun her into apathy. She set to work almost at once to make a home and livelihood for herself. The most despised of her accomplishments helped her. It is the rare talent that pays. She could draw and paint very prettily, but so could multitudes of others. But she had one accomplishment that was unique. In silhouette she had no rival. Give her a sharp scissors and a sheet of thin black paper, and she would give you in return with marvellous distinctness an outline of an animal, or of a landscape, or a faithful profile of a human face. She had such a happy knack to catch a familiar and characteristic pose that there was art of its kind in her black outlines. By the exercise of this art she was able, at least, to keep food on her table and a roof over her head, if little more.

Many of her former friends would willingly have helped her. But she refused all aid, and after a time they dropped quietly out of her life. Of those whom the heiress had known in the old days only three remained to the scissors and black paper artist. There was her distant cousin Frederick Norris ; a quiet, good-looking self-contained young man whom his friends prophesied would go far. After a brilliant student career he had got the letters 'M.D.' to

his name in the Medical Register. But he had got next to nothing to his name in his bank book. He came now and again for a cup of afternoon tea to the quiet little sitting-room which Maggie called her studio. There also came the gay, young actress Carrie Vivian, whose name was already beginning to creep into prominence in the newspapers.

Maggie Norris's third friend was Dora Myrl, the lady detective.

'Oh, I'm getting on, Dora,' she said, while her scissors all the time went snip-snap and littered with thin black shavings the floor of the little room which she had occupied for over six months. 'I am getting on; not like you, dear, of course, who have jumped into fame and fortune at a spring. All the newspapers are full of that story of the fiddle.'

'The case was as easy as kiss hands, Mag. I cannot tell why they make such a fuss about it.'

She drew off her gloves slowly, dropped into an easy wicker-work chair, and watched her friend's nimble white fingers admiringly, and the quaint outlines that grew under her scissors.

'That's what they said to Christopher Columbus, Dora, when he showed them how to

make the egg stand. But Christy himself knew better. There you are, my dear, guessing one of your riddles.' She tossed her a scrap of black paper with a wonderfully clever profile of herself. There was a subtle suggestion of intentness in every line of it.

'Have you ever failed yet, Dora?'

'I have never yet got a really hard riddle to guess.'

'Well, I don't know what you call hard. I could never guess the easiest, and you're so clever. But all the same I think I could put you a conundrum that would puzzle even you.'

'I can only do my best.'

'Isn't it the motive that helps you to find things out. I remember reading in some detective book, "search first for the motive."'

'"Cherchez la femme" is the true reading.'

'Oh, of course, but the woman is very often the motive. Am I not right; isn't the motive the best clue?'

'That's so,' Dora agreed.

'Well, I am going to tell you of an offence without a motive.'

'You cannot. Every offence has its motive; even a madman has his motive, such as it is.'

'Don't be too sure of that till you hear my story out. There can be no possible motive for the theft I'm going to tell you of.'

She crossed the room and took a small packet from a locked drawer. 'Here are a bundle of old letters; I think I showed them to you before? No! well, that doesn't matter; they are from my grand-uncle to my grandmother, written nearly fifty years ago. Like my poor father, he lost his fortune suddenly, and his health followed it. When he was utterly broken down my grandmother, his youngest sister, came to hear of it. She sent him such money as she could spare or as she couldn't spare—she was not very rich in those days—and comforted him with long loving letters. These are the replies. She gave them to my mother and my mother gave them to me. Just listen to the last of all, written just after my mother's birth and just before the writer's death. I have often cried over it.'

She picked up a worn yellow letter out of the packet, and read with a little catch in her voice:

'My dear Sister,—It was like your own kind heart to think of a poor broken-down castaway at such a time. Your husband

himself was not gladder of the good news than I was. May God bless you and the dear little daughter, and repay you for all your kindness to me, for I never can. I will not trouble you much longer, Emily. Don't grieve for me. My only grief is that I can do nothing to show my gratitude. But if in the next world we are allowed to have a hand in the doings of this, your children and your children's children shall be my dearest care.'

As Maggie read the letter her tears fell rustling on the paper; not for the first time, as the blisters showed.

'He died the day this was written,' she said softly.

There was silence for a full minute: she had forgotten all about her wonderful conundrum.

'Where does my riddle come in?' said Dora at last.

'Oh, I had forgotten. You see these old letters. They are of no value to anyone but me. It would be foolish enough, goodness knows, to steal the letters; but what do you think of the thief who stole the ragged old envelopes and left the letters behind him?'

'How do you know they were stolen?' Dora asked with sudden seriousness.

'Because I left the letters in a locked drawer with their envelopes on. The lock was tampered with and the envelopes are gone. I'm a most careless person as a rule. I leave my scraps of jewellery and loose change anywhere and everywhere strewn about, but I never missed any before. Isn't it a curious case, Dora?'

'Very curious and interesting and exciting. Where do you say your uncle wrote from?'

'I didn't say, but it was from the Mauritius.'

'What were the envelopes like?'

'The same paper as the letters, but more torn and worn.'

'You are an artist, Maggie. Could you do me a facsimile of one of the envelopes?'

'I think I could. Will a pencil do?' She cut off a piece of paper about the size of an envelope and slowly traced an address on it in a shaky hand. Then she paused. 'Do you want the postmark and stamp and all that?'

'Yes, everything you remember.'

'Oh, I remember well enough. The stamp was the prettiest queen's head I have ever seen; young, with a slight crown, and the hair done up with three little knobs at the back—this way.'

She made a dainty sketch of a queen's head on the paper with a crowquill pen.

'Can you fill in the letters?'

'Well, you want a lot. I cannot remember —yes, I do. "Mauritius" was at the right hand; and, let me see, "Post Office" on the left. I cannot think what was at the top and bottom.'

'But the colour—surely you remember the colour?' There was a note of intense eagerness in Dora's voice.

'Of course,' Maggie answered, smiling. She dipped a camel's-hair brush in a little porcelain trough of water, rubbed it on to a slab of paint in her box, and painted the little sketch of the stamp a delicate blue.

There was a sudden little cry from Dora.

Maggie looked up surprised. 'Why, Dora, how pale and excited you look. I meant my riddle as a bit of fun for you.'

'I wish you had shown me those letters with the envelopes on, Maggie.'

'Have you guessed anything, Dora? Oh! you have. I see it in your eyes. You have found the thief's motive.'

'Well, yes, my dear old innocent Peggy, I think I may say I have found the thief's motive.'

'And the thief?'

'No. I have yet to find the thief.'

'Do tell me all about it.'

'Well, of course you have heard there are such things as postage stamp collectors?'

'Of course.'

'You don't by any chance happen to know one intimately?'

'Oh no. I have always thought it the silliest of crazes.'

'That depends. Now I happen to know a little of the subject, though I am not a collector myself. The stamps on those envelopes are rather fancied by collectors.'

'And they are of some money value?'

'Well, yes; I think I may safely say they are of some money value.'

'That disposes of the motive. You have guessed my riddle.'

'But I want a little more. I want the thief and the stamps'—especially the stamps.

'What do you mean to do about it?'

'In the first place, I am going to set a simple, little, commonplace trap in the shape of an advertisement in the "Times"; just this.'

She wrote as she spoke:

'Wanted, one or more blue Mauritius stamps. The full market price will be given. Strictly confidential.'

'You see there are not many of those stamps going, and the collectors are likely to hold what they have. So that the advertisement may fetch the thief.'

Luck seemed to be with Dora. Two days afterwards she had a single answer to the advertisement; a very brief and discreet answer, written apparently in a disguised hand, 'State terms and address to "X," General Post Office, to be left till called for.'

She showed the answer to Maggie, and replied stating generous terms—'Address "Y Z," General Post Office.'

There was no answer the next day nor the next. But on the third day—the first of April as it chanced—there was a thin letter for 'Y Z.' She tore it open hastily and found the two words 'April Fool,' nothing more, written in the same hand still more elaborately disguised.

Dora was puzzled, and carried her perplexities to Maggie.

'That's just what he prophesied,' said Maggie.

'He! who?'

'Why Fred, of course. I mean Dr. Norris, my cousin, you know.'

'But what did he know about it?

'Carrie Vivian and I were chatting the matter over the other day, after you brought me the first answer, you know, and when Carrie told him he said he was sure the thief would never be so silly as to run his head straight into your trap.'

Dora's eyes brightened and her lips tightened. 'She said that he said the thief would trick me. Well, we shall see.'

She left the place without another word. For a week there was no sign of her, but at the end of the week a dapper, dark-skinned little Frenchman called with a note from Dora to Maggie.

She was too busy, Dora wrote, to call herself, but she could not refuse a line of introduction to her friend, Monsieur Duval, who was anxious to have some photographic views he had taken of Irish scenery artistically coloured. 'M. Duval,' the letter ran, 'is rich and can pay generously, and I believe he will; besides that, he is a very old and dear friend of mine; so I hope you will be good to him for my sake, and a little for his own. P.S.—I have not forgotten our riddle. I hope to puzzle it out yet.—D. M.'

Maggie received the dapper little Frenchman kindly for Dora's sake, and liked him for

his own. His manner was so unaffectedly bright and pleasant that it was impossible not to like him. He was full of naïve curiosity about everything and everybody, and his child-like ignorance of English ways was a constant source of amusement.

He professed himself charmed at the way his photos were being tinted, and persuaded her to begin a little portrait of himself on ivory. But, strangely enough, he could never be coaxed to sit for one of the silhouettes which were Maggie's speciality.

Carrie Vivian met M. Duval at Maggie's studio and was taken by him at once, and carried him off to the theatre and made much of him. But Dr. Frederick Norris did not cotton to him in the least.

About this time Dr. Norris had given up calling at his cousin's studio. His manner, always quiet and self-contained, had grown almost morose, and he talked of flinging up his growing practice in London and trying his luck in South Africa. It was a coincidence that about the same time Maggie's spirits and appetite deserted her. She sighed and moped, and even the sallies of the gay little Frenchman could hardly rouse her.

In spite of his antipathy to M. Duval, the little Frenchman had a curious attraction for Dr. Norris. It would almost seem as if the doctor followed and watched the gay unconscious Duval. They were almost constantly meeting by awkwardly contrived 'accidents' when M. Duval was visiting Maggie. Though the doctor was often rude and suspicious, the kind-hearted Frenchman, ignoring his rudeness and suspicion, was the very essence of politeness. One afternoon Dr. Norris ran across him more abrupt and brusque than ever, as he was leaving Maggie's rooms; and Monsieur was, as usual, charmed to meet his *très chèr ami*.

They walked a little way together, the Frenchman chatting and the doctor silent. They passed the doctor's house, and with a manifest effort he asked his companion in.

Monsieur Duval gracefully accepted the ungracious invitation. In the doctor's den they smoked cigarettes for a while in silence.

Then Fred broke out abruptly: 'Would you mind, Monsieur, if I asked you a rude question?'

The other held up his small hands with a pretty deprecatory gesture.

'Monsieur! rude! It is impossible!'

'Well, I'll try, anyhow. Do you mean to marry Miss Norris?'

'You flatter me by the question, Monsieur, flatter me in a way you dream not of. But, alas! no. Mademoiselle is *très* charming. She is deserving of any man's love, Monsieur will observe; of any man's love. I too love her, but it is not the love she needs. Be very sure, Monsieur, if I should offer myself for a husband she refuse, and I do not mean to offer.'

'I wish I could be quite sure,' said Fred, with a sudden cordiality of manner to which the genial Frenchman responded.

He had been fluttering about the room like an inquisitive bird. Suddenly he lit upon a stamp album, half hidden by a pile of books on a side table.

'And this—it is yours?' he said, turning over the leaves rapidly. 'It is a very pretty collection.'

The doctor seemed a little confused at the question. 'No, it is not mine,' he said, hesitatingly. 'I believe it is Miss Vivian's. She comes to my den sometimes, and she left that album, asking me to look over it.'

'Mademoiselle is *esprit de monsieur*—is it not?'

'See here, Duval. You are a decent little chap enough, though I didn't always think so, and you mean no harm; but we don't talk like that of young ladies in this country. If an Englishman said that I'd give him a very different answer.'

'But I have my eyes, monsieur, and I see Mademoiselle is *très belle*, and she speak low and blush when Monsieur speak to her, and she look at Monsieur just so.'

Monsieur Duval gave a very lifelike imitation of 'the bashful maiden's sidelong glance of love.'

Norris could hardly refrain from smiling, though he was annoyed too.

'D——n it, Monsieur,' he said, 'drop it; don't talk any more of that rot.'

'But Monsieur will bring the beautiful young lady back her album, is it not?' the Frenchman persisted insinuatingly.

'You may bring it back to the beautiful young lady yourself if you choose.'

'I make Monsieur a thousand thanks, and he? He will go to prescribe for Mademoiselle Norris, who is not very well.'

Monsieur Duval slipped out of the room with a French parody of a wink.

'Cute little chap,' admitted Dr. Norris as he followed a moment afterwards, taking the direction of 'the studio.'

Carrie Vivian was delighted to see Monsieur Duval in her own gay little sitting-room. But when she saw the stamp album in his hand, her face fell.

'You bring a message from Dr. Norris?' she said.

'Mademoiselle very much admires Monsieur the doctor—is it not?'

'Don't talk nonsense'—with a very becoming blush. 'What's the message?'

'There is no message. He sends back the album, that is all.'

'But he has looked through it?'

'No, mademoiselle, he has not. But I have, and I found it wonderful. In it there is a blue Mauritius—the most rare and beautiful. Is it that Mademoiselle desire that Monsieur the doctor should know how rich she is?'

'Monsieur, you are pleased to be rude.'

'Mademoiselle, I will be pleased to be more ruder. The stamp—it is not genuine. It is a forgery; very clever. I, Monsieur Duval, am a detective and I know. It is a dangerous game that you play, Mademoiselle!'

'It is a lie,' cried the frightened girl. 'I myself cut the stamp off a genuine envelope from the Mauritius. I have other envelopes with the stamps on.'

'That is not easy to believe, Mademoiselle.'

'But I can prove it to be true.'

'It would be rude to contradict a lady.'

'If I show the envelopes, will you believe the stamps genuine?'

'If you show me genuine envelopes with stamps on I will believe.'

'And you will go?'

'And I will go, oh most certainly.'

She rushed impetuously to a locked drawer and drew out a packet of seven old envelopes. Six had blue Mauritius stamps; the other a square hole where the stamp had been.

Monsieur Duval examined them carefully, and fitted the loose stamp to the place it had been cut from.

'Mademoiselle is quite right,' he said, 'the envelopes are genuine and the stamps,' and he calmly proceeded to put stamps and envelopes into his pocket.

'Pardon me, Monsieur,' said Carrie with an angry dart at his hand.

'You will pardon me, Mademoiselle,' he

replied, dexterously evading her. He drew a facsimile of one of the envelopes from his pocket and held it before her eyes.

'The stamps are not forged, it is true, but it is worse that they are stolen. I go to restore them to the owner, your good friend Miss Norris.'

Before the affrighted girl could find words to answer him, Frenchman, envelopes, and stamps were gone together.

He found, as he anticipated, Dr. Norris prescribing for his cousin Maggie, who already looked very much the better for his prescription.

'*Ma chère*,' he began abruptly, 'I am come to say good-bye. It is sudden, but what wish you? My work is done. You will not see Monsieur Duval any more.'

'I am very sorry,' Maggie began. But he spoke again.

'I have a leetle request before I go. You will make for me the silhouette. Often you have ask and I refuse. Now it is my turn I ask; you will not refuse?'

'I will be delighted; it won't take a moment. Turn your head just like that and keep steady.'

She caught up a sheet of black paper and scissors and began rapidly—snip ; snip ; snip. Suddenly the scissors dropped with a crash.

'Dora!' she shrieked, half crying, half laughing. 'It's Dora!'

'Precisely, my dear,' said Dora Myrl's voice in the most matter of fact tones. 'I guessed your scissors would find me out. It is so hard to disguise one's profile.'

'But what did you mean by it?'

'Well, in the first place I wanted to get the doctor to prescribe for you, and then I wanted to get you a handsome fee to pay for the prescription.'

She put a tiny packet into Maggie's hand.

'Oh!' Maggie cried, 'the seven old stamps off my old letters.'

'Don't turn up your nose, Mag, at those little scraps of paper. They are more valuable than any substance of the same weight in the known world ; diamonds are simply not in it. The last of those stamps that was sold fetched a thousand pounds in the open market. Seven thousand pounds, there or thereabouts, is a tidy little fortune to begin housekeeping on.'

'Oh! Dora ; how dare you!'

'I have eyes in my head, my dear, tolerably

sharp ones, I m glad to say. Maggie! Maggie! what a hypocrite you are. Didn't you often tell me you'd never marry?'

'Oh, no! Dora,' Maggie whispered, laughing and blushing, 'not that exactly. I said I would never change my name.'

'And I guessed what you meant by that, my dear, when I sent Dr. Norris to prescribe for you.'

IX

WAS IT A FORGERY?

'It would be a great charity if you could and would, Miss Myrl.'

'Is that a professional reason, Sir Gregory?' asked Dora mockingly.

'You are always tempting me to forget your profession and then catching me up. Well, then, I'll talk strict business.'

'Sugar?' she interrupted, poising the lump in the silver tongs over the delicate Sevres cup, for Sir Gregory had 'dropped in promiscuous' to afternoon tea. Pleasure, not business, seemed her mission in the world. Her pale blue tea gown that matched her complexion to a wish was the triumph of a Paris dressmaker. There was a vague glimpse of a neat foot and ankle at the skirts. Her glossy hair was coiled in the latest fashion, and her bright eyes sparkled with gay humour. Sir Gregory was

to be pardoned if in this bright young beauty he forgot the lady detective.

'What did you say?' he asked bewildered. 'Oh! yes, if you please'—and the sugar subsided from the tongs into his tea.

'It's no use, Miss Myrl, I cannot find the proper business tone with you. May I talk to you as a friend?'

'I don't want to talk to you or think of you in any other way, Sir Gregory!'

'Well, I come to beg of you to go down and stay with this girl Annie Lovel as a friend at her uncle's place Riversdale.'

'Why! you've told me that before, but you haven't yet told me why?'

'You knew her uncle—Sir Randal Lovel?'

'The great book collector? I know nothing bad of him.'

'And his nephew Albert Lovel?'

'I know nothing good of him.'

'There isn't any good to know. From his boyhood he was a bad lot, not wild but vicious. He was expelled from three schools, and sent down from the university. He got leave to retire from the army, and there was a story of cheating at cards. Other and still worse stories steamed up from his trail through the Con-

tinent. There is talk of a fatal duel and a pistol fired before the signal. He has been twice co-respondent in the divorce courts. A girl committed suicide the other day whom—but I need not go into those scandals. You may take it from me that Albert Lovel—Albert the Good, as he is generally called—is the gayest, brightest, handsomest, most accomplished, and most utterly heartless and conscienceless young reprobate in the three kingdoms.

'But Sir Randal Lovel believed in him, Miss Myrl, when everyone else ceased to believe. You see he is the baronet's heir. Sir Randal is proud of his family. He is immensely wealthy, the estate is not entailed, and it was to the young reprobate's interest to throw dust in his eyes if he could. It was easy enough. Sir Randal leads a secluded life; he is credulous of good, as all high-minded honourable men are, and loth to believe evil. This gay young reprobate ran down occasionally to shoot the pheasants at Riversdale, and make distant and respectful love to his cousin Miss Annie Lovel, and Sir Randal was delighted.

'But the crash came at last, as it was bound to come. Some story reached Sir Randal's

ears with clear proof behind it—the story of some man whom Albert had swindled or some woman he had ruined. The baronet was roused to inquiries, and the whole truth of his nephew's career came out. There is nothing more terrible than a quiet man enraged. Albert was sent for. There was a stormy interview. The barricade of subterfuge and falsehood which the young reprobate set up was swept away in the torrent of the old man's righteous anger.

'Sir Randal swore to disinherit him. Then "Albert the Good"—hypocrisy having proved worthless—laughed openly in his face.

'"Threatened men live long," he said, "and *vice versa*"—and went jauntily from the room and out of the house.

'Next morning Sir Randal sent to London for his solicitor to change his will, and next evening Sir Randal was shot as he sat in his study by an open window that looked out upon the lawn.'

'Shot by whom?'

'Who can tell? No sound of firearms was heard, but the servant, coming by a lucky accident into the room, found him lying back in his chair half-conscious, bleeding and moaning, but too feeble to cry out.

'The wound proved not to be serious. The bullet had struck his watch, smashed it, and glanced off into the muscles of the left shoulder. It came so near the skin that it was easily extracted.

'Sir Randal insisted on hushing the whole thing. In a week he was able to be up and about again. He countermanded the summons to his solicitor. "Too dangerous," he muttered without further explaining himself, and he drew out a will in his own handwriting, and the doctor and clergyman from the neighbouring town witnessed it. No one saw the will, but it is assumed that it left all his property to his niece. He locked the will up in the strong safe in his study, and carried the key always about with him in an inner pocket. Every morning it was his habit to take it out and glance through it, as if to assure himself of its safety.'

'Nothing happened to the will?' Dora asked. 'So far your story is very exciting, Sir Gregory.'

'I trust the end of it will prove tame commonplace,' he said. 'But there was just one other incident I have to tell you of; a burglary—say rather an attempted burglary.

There was a skilful and determined effort made to break open the safe. But the alarm was given in time, and the burglar had to fly before he was half through with his work. Don't be impatient with an old proser, Miss Myrl, I'm just at the end of my story. Sir Randal died suddenly the day before yesterday!'

'Oh!'

'No, no! It wasn't that. I mean it was a natural death from pneumonia, though the doctor thought that the bullet wound had probably hastened his end. Now this poor little girl I told you of is left alone in that great house with a great pack of honest stupid servants around her, but no friend. She has written to me, but I am chained to London at present. I want someone to go down at once—a woman, if possible, with a kind heart and quick wit; a woman that can look after herself and others.'

'Meaning me?' said Dora, dropping him a gay little curtsey; 'flattered, I'm sure!'

'It's the plain truth, Miss Myrl!'

'Prettier and prettier. There is no resisting you, Sir Gregory. What train can I go by?'

'There is a fast train in an hour and a half,

if that's not too soon. You will get there in less than two hours, in time for dinner at seven. I will wire at once and you will be met at the railway station, which is only three miles from the house.'

She was met at the station with an open two-horse phaeton by Miss Lovel herself, who welcomed her heartily ; and they drove together through the avenue of lime trees, two massive walls of verdure, in the red glory of an autumn sunset, to the great house that reared its tall gables amongst the woods.

Before the dinner was over the two girls were as old friends. Miss Lovel had been sorely tried by anxiety and sorrow, for her dead uncle had always been to her a father. With anxiety and sorrow, fear was mingled. She feared her handsome cousin as the devout Christian of the Middle Ages feared the devil, not without admiration in her terror.

Prepared from what she had heard to give her confidence to her companion, she was captivated from the very first by Dora, whose alert cheerfulness was a tonic to her nerves and heart. Her pale cheeks flushed and her sad eyes brightened as they sat chatting together in the drawing-room, and for the first time for

months, she looked what she naturally was, a pretty light-hearted country lass whose whole nature was attuned to joy, not sorrow.

An hour after dinner Dora caught herself in the midst of a lively description of London Society life, and looked at her watch.

'To business!' she said briskly. 'We must keep the wolf from the door. You know the wolf I mean, Miss Lovel?'

'Call me Annie!'

'All right, Annie. I want you to show me the room where the safe is. Sir Gregory has told me the whole story, you see!'

Dora had brought an ingenious little toy of her own contriving from London; an electric battery and bell and coil of isolated wire. In five minutes she had arranged it so that a touch at the door or the window of the study would set the bell ringing. There was no alarm during the night. The bell never so much as tinkled till the first touch of the chambermaid's hand on the knob sprang the trap with a sudden jangling in the morning.

The girls had a pleasant and quiet morning together, but in the afternoon there was a somewhat startling surprise.

Dora chanced to be on the drawing-room

landing when there came a modest ring and a gentle knock at the hall door.

She waited and saw the visitor give his card to the footman. She had never seen him before, but she guessed his identity in a moment, and ran down the stairs to greet him.

'Mr. Albert Lovel, I presume?'

He bowed with perfect grace and courtesy. 'Sir Albert Lovel is now the absolutely correct name,' he answered lightly, 'but I don't want to stand on ceremony with you, Miss Myrl; call me just what you choose!'

Dora was startled by his recognition, but kept her surprise out of her face.

'You know me then?' she cried in a tone as light as his own.

'Of course I do. I never forget a face, particularly, if you will forgive me saying so, a pretty face. I only saw you once. It was at a race at which I lost money and you won a reputation. I'm not likely to forget the charming lady detective!'

In his manner raillery and flattery were delicately blended. He was an altogether charming Apollo in a perfectly fitting cycling suit. His lips wore a gay smile; his dark eyes sparkled with merriment; his voice was

musical as a flute. Yet withal he was a manly man; the kind of man that captures girls wholesale.

'I know what you are here for, of course, Miss Myrl,' he went on gaily. 'You are the wolf-dog—forgive the comparison—sent down to guard the dear little pet lamb Annie, and I'm the wolf. Well! *en garde!*'

'Is that a challenge, Sir Albert?'

'A friendly challenge to a game of skill, nothing more. Ah! here comes my charming cousin!' There was subtle impalpable change in his manner and voice, a vague suggestion of tenderness and devotion, as he raised his cousin's hand to his lips, and Dora noticed Annie's face flushed as their eyes met.

'I come to condole with you, my cousin,' he said, and to Dora's ears there was a faint accent of mockery in his voice that Annie's ears missed.

'Is it not better to be quite frank, Sir Albert?' Dora asked.

'Certainly!' he answered, without the smallest change of voice; 'I was about to tell my cousin I have come specially to hear the will read.'

'It will not be read for three days,' Dora

answered quickly, 'Mr. Bennett cannot come before.'

'Till then,' he said, 'I must claim the hospitality of Riversdale. As the nearest male relative and presumptive heir of Sir Randal I might, perhaps, claim it as a right. I prefer to request it as a favour.'

Annie looked irresolutely at Dora. 'It's a favour you cannot well refuse,' Dora said, answering the look.

Sir Albert bowed his acknowledgments. As the three passed the door of the study where the safe was, Dora threw it open. There was a man inside with a frieze jacket and gaiters seated in a big armchair, with a double-barrelled fowling-piece between his knees.

'One of the keepers, Sir Albert,' Dora explained; 'we keep one or other of them here ready night and day. You may have heard of the attempted burglary. Don't you think this is a wise precaution?'

'Extremely,' he answered frankly, exactly as if he meant it.

To both girls Sir Albert proved a most delightful companion; gentle, sympathetic, cheerful—but not too cheerful. There was a vague hint of lovemaking in his tone to

Annie, but nothing tangible. His manner to Dora was that of frank comradeship. Withal he was so pleasant to look at and talk to that she had to keep her memory fixed on what he really was to save herself from the peril of liking and trusting him. The girls had a rude awakening from their pleasant dream on the morning of the second day.

Dora was in the garden pacing the central walk, luxuriating, like a cat, in the bright warm sunshine, which brought out the colour and odour of the old-fashioned flowers, when Annie came running to her pale and frightened.

'The key of the safe has been stolen!' she cried.

'When?' Dora asked. 'Do try to keep your wits and nerves steady, my dear!' for Annie was shaking like a leaf in the wind.

'I can't in the least tell when. It was kept, as you know, in the secret drawer of the desk in the dining-room. I put it there when uncle died, and I have not looked at it since. Something suddenly tempted me to look for it to-day. I half expected to find it was gone, but I was horribly frightened all the same!'

'Being frightened won't help a bit. The first thing is to see if the safe has been opened. Come along!'

They went straight to the study. The gamekeeper was there stolidly vigilant.

Dora gave just one glance at the safe door.

'All right so far!' she said shortly.

'But how do you know?' Annie asked.

'It is so simple it's not worth telling. I just gummed a hair across the slit of the door, and it is there still. Now to find the key? Where is Sir Albert?'

'In his own sitting-room. He's been there all the morning since breakfast.'

'With the door locked on the inside, I dare say. Is there a second key for the room?'

'The housekeeper has one, but'——

'Well, get it for me like a good girl,' Dora interrupted persuasively. 'I don't want to trouble Sir Albert more than I can help.'

With the key in her hand she came softly to the door and turned the handle without a sound. As she anticipated, it was locked on the inside. She slipped the key in, shooting the other out before it, and flung the door open.

Sir Albert started from his seat with a curse. For a second his face was devilish with rage. But he instantly recovered his

composure. With his left hand he caught something bright from the table and thrust it into the pocket of his smoking jacket, as he turned to face Dora with a smile on his lips and in his eyes.

'This is indeed an unexpected treat, Miss Myrl,' he said.

Dora glanced past him at the table at which he had been seated. There was a spirit lamp still burning with a crucible set upon it, and beside the lamp on the table a blowpipe and some fragments of bright metal, and what looked like chips of very thick brown paper. Amongst this litter a handsome pipe-case in green morocco was laid. Close to his chair was his green morocco travelling-bag, open, and brilliant with gold fittings. On another corner of the table a writing-case from the travelling-bag also lay open, with scraps of paper, pens of several sizes, and an ink eraser, all littered about.

With a smile and a word of apology, Dora crossed the room. 'What a handsome pipe case!' she said innocently, stretching out her hand to it.

But Sir Albert was too quick for her. He caught up the case before her fingers reached

it. 'You mustn't touch it, Miss Myrl,' he cried, 'it smells abominably of stale tobacco,' and with that he thrust it into one of the recesses of the bag so violently that it broke through the green silk and went down between the lining and the leather.

'You have been busy at some literary work, Sir Albert, I see,' Dora went on, without seeming to notice the abruptness of his movement.

'Yes,' he answered carelessly, 'I have been trying to imitate my uncle's handwriting. Confess that is what you suspect, Miss Myrl; so I may as well make a clean breast of it.' But as he spoke he gathered up the fragments of loose paper and snapped down the lid of the spring ink-bottle and closed the writing case. Then he glanced at the lighted spirit lamp and the crucible in which the white metal simmered.

'I was making bullets for my air gun,' he went on calmly. 'They must fit perfectly tight to be effective, so I cast them myself.'

If she remembered at the moment the cowardly shot that struck his uncle down, her face showed no sign.

'Oh! it is I owe you an explanation, Sir

Albert,' she said sweetly. 'I came to tell you that the key of the safe has been lost, or rather stolen. Miss Lovel is nervous about it. I thought you might'——

'Oh! Of course, of course,' he cried graciously. 'I'll come at once to help to look for it.'

In five minutes he had found the key for them under the writing desk in whose secret drawer Miss Lovel had supposed it hidden.

'You are really very clever, Sir Albert,' Dora said naïvely, as he handed the key to Annie, and he looked her straight in the eyes and laughed out loud—a pleasant musical laugh.

That same evening he caught her in one of the hothouses in the far end of the garden, where he had strolled out for a smoke, with a big hammer in her hand pounding some fragments of glass to powder on the flagged floor.

'Why! Miss Myrl!' he cried, 'what do you call this?'

'The mousetrap! marry how? tropically,' Dora quoted demurely, as she swept some of the white powder into a paper and put it in her pocket.

Then he laughed again—a puzzled little

laugh this time. 'Miss Myrl!' he said suddenly, 'you interest me much. Could we not play this little game as partners and divide the stakes. We two together would be hard to beat?'

'Oh! no, Sir Albert,' was the gay reply, 'I'm on the other side. Remember Miss Lovel is my partner; we are playing for the championship.'

Next afternoon the solicitor, Mr. Bennett, and with him Sir Gregory, came down for the reading of the will. Dora could have sworn the safe had not been opened in the interval.

Still, she felt a sharp pang of anxiety as the solicitor took the document into his hand. But there was no need for it; the will was concise and clear. Apart from a few legacies to old friends and servants, he left all the testator die possessed of to his 'beloved niece Annie Lovel.'

Dora breathed a deep sigh of relief.

The thing was done, not to be undone. The will was wholly in the testator's handwriting, the witnesses unimpeachable. The game was over, and her clever opponent seemed not to have made a single effective move.

This frightened and puzzled her a little, and

she had a consultation with the solicitor and Sir Gregory Grant.

'Yes,' the solicitor said, 'you are quite right, Miss Myrl, in thinking that a copy of the will can be proved if the original is destroyed. It can be even proved on parol evidence. I have heard of Mr. Albert Lovel, who has not? Albert the Good, ha! ha! Albert the Best; Sir Albert now—I beg his pardon, and I suppose he would have no objection to the estates to keep up the title. But there is not the shadow of a chance for him, however, I will bring a certified copy of the will back with me to London, as you desire it.'

'May I take a photograph, meantime?' Dora asked. 'I have brought my camera down with me.'

'It will be quite unnecessary,' said the solicitor.

But Sir Gregory insisted that in dealing with 'Albert the Good' no precaution was unnecessary, and the photograph was taken.

The chief marvel of all was the behaviour of Sir Albert Lovel in the delicate and trying position in which he was placed. He made no attempt to conceal his disappointment, but he bore it like a gentleman. His congratula-

tion of the heiress was in the best possible taste. 'I must confess,' he said, 'I should wish to have found my own name with yours in the will. But it comforts me a great deal to think if this fortune is not mine, it is yours.' Nor was there any suggestion of lovemaking in his manner, which was manly, kind, and cousinly. Annie pitied him, and would have handed him one half of the great fortune at once. But Sir Gregory Grant as the executor, and Mr. Bennett as the solicitor objected, and Sir Albert, when it came to his ears, point blank refused.

There were many business details to be seen to at Riversdale, and Sir Gregory and the solicitor stayed for a week before they returned with the will and copy to London. Sir Albert went with them. He had won his way in spite of themselves and their knowledge of him into the suburbs, so to speak, of their confidence. Before they parted Sir Gregory offered, of his own accord, a loan of five hundred pounds, which he frankly accepted, casually remarking that he needed it very particularly.

Dora remained a few days longer at Riversdale, relieved, but still bewildered at the turn affairs had taken.

On her return to London she took a five weeks' trip to the Continent, and the whole case slipped from her mind. She arrived back in London on a Friday night.

On Saturday afternoon, in her own cozy little sitting-room, she lazily opened the 'Westminster Gazette,' and in the most prominent place on the front page her eye lit instantly on this sensational headline :

LOVEL *v.* LOVEL
THE GREAT WILL CASE
A MILLION AT STAKE
EXTRAORDINARY DÉNOÛMENT
IS IT A FORGERY?

Her eye ran rapidly over the paragraph :

'The Lovel *v.* Lovel will case tried at the Oxford Assizes before Judge Smith and a special jury to-day suddenly assumed an unexpected and sensational aspect. It will be remembered that the late Sir Randal Lovel by a will wholely in his own handwriting left his entire fortune, estimated at over a million sterling, to his niece Miss Annie Lovel, disinheriting his nephew Sir Albert Lovel. There were said to be circumstances that made this bequest natural. The will was in

regular form, the testamentary capacity of Sir Randal was indisputable, and the witnesses of the highest respectability. It was a matter of surprise when at the last moment Sir Albert entered a caveat. But the advisers of the young lady had no fear for the result, and the proof of the will was regarded as merely formal. The plaintiffs closed their case in five minutes; none of the witnesses were cross-examined. Counsel for the defence then put the will into the hand of the eminent expert Mr. Crosscaden, and asked him to examine the signature. He examined it closely through a pocket microscope and pronounced it genuine. Thereupon it seemed as if the case had closed. But glancing through the body of the will witness made an astounding discovery. At the words "niece Annie" there had been plainly a most skilful erasure and re-writing. The letters "iece" in "niece" and the letters "nnie" in "Annie" had plainly been most cleverly forged in the handwriting of the testator. The suggestion was that the word had originally stood 'nephew Albert,' but this it was quite unnecessary to consider, as in the event of the will being set aside the property—which is almost entirely real- goes to Sir

Albert as heir-at-law. All in court were astounded at the discovery, and all sorts of rumours were rife as to the identity of the forger. At the request of council for the plaintiff the case was adjourned until Monday morning, but there can be now no doubt as to the result.'

Dora dropped the paper and picked up a Bradshaw. 'I'll catch it by a rush,' she muttered. 'A hansom, quick!' she said to the servant who answered the electric bell, while she packed a travelling-bag neatly in spite of her haste. She was at the door the same instant as the hansom.

'Paddington!' she cried, jumping in; 'a sovereign if you catch the train!'

That evening she had an interview at his hotel with Sir Gregory Grant and Mr. Bennett, the plaintiff's solicitor, who were not more amazed than delighted to see her. Subsequently all three had a consultation with the leading counsel for the plaintiff, Mr. Percival Carver, Q.C.

The court doors were besieged on Monday morning, and the instant they opened the crowd filled every available crevice as completely as a torrent fills a reservoir.

Dora was in court seated beside the plain-

tiff's solicitor, in her neat travelling costume and coquettish little hat, looking as much out of place as a butterfly amongst grubs. But it might have been noticed that the leading counsel for the plaintiff consulted her much more frequently than his solicitor.

'Now! Mr. Carver,' said the judge sharply, as he took his seat on the bench.

But Sir Julius Tulliver, Q.C., Solicitor-General, who led for the defendant, interposed:

'Your pardon for one moment, my lord,' he said deferentially. He was brimming over with delight of anticipated triumph. 'Sir Albert Lovel, the defendant in this case, has this morning been served with a very extraordinary document—a *sub pœna duce tecum*—to produce his travelling-bag. I merely wish to say for the information of my learned friend that Sir Albert and his travelling-bag are in court. We will have his hat case and portmanteau sent for if they should be required.'

At this there was a ripple of laughter in court. But Mr. Carver was unabashed. 'I think we shall find the travelling-bag sufficient,' he said very quietly, as he took it into his hands. 'Will your lordship bear with me a moment?'

Sir Julius, who knew his man, did not relish his tone.

The learned counsel felt the bag and shook it, and turned with a gratified smile to Dora. 'You are right,' he said in a whisper, 'it is there still.' With that he thrust his hand through a break in the silk lining of the bag, and, after some fumbling, he drew out a green morocco pipe-case and laid it beside his brief on the table. Then he took the writing case from the bag.

'The same?' he asked Dora, still in a whisper, tipping the lid of the ink-bottle with his finger.

'The same,' she answered in a whisper.

'Well? Mr. Carver,' the judge cried, a little impatiently.

'Quite ready, my lord, quite ready. Will your lordship kindly allow the expert Mr. Crosscaden to be recalled? There are just one or two questions I would like to ask him?'

'Certainly, Mr. Carver,' assented the judge.

'Mr. Crosscaden,' said Mr. Carver in his blandest tone, when the witness stepped into the box, 'will you kindly examine again with that microscope of yours, if you please, the words

you swear have been written into the will, and tell me do you notice anything peculiar?'

'Do you mean in the formation of the letters?' asked the witness.

'No, I mean in the quality of the ink?'

'Nothing particular,' said Mr. Crosscaden, after careful examination, except'——

'Well! except what?'

'There are a number of particles of what look like glass in the ink. They are very minute, but they are of course quite distinct under the microscope.'

'That's what I want. Have you ever noticed this peculiarity in ink before?'

'Never.'

'Would it, in your opinion, account for this peculiarity if someone had put ground glass into the bottle from which the ink was taken?'

'Certainly, but'——

'One moment, if you please!'

Mr. Carver dipped his pen deep into the ink-bottle of Sir Albert's writing case, turning the point round twice. Then he wrote the word 'Forger' heavily on a piece of paper he tore from his brief and handed it to the expert.

'Just look at that through the microscope,'

he said; 'do you find the same minute fragments of glass in that ink?'

'Certainly, they are quite distinct, but I cannot explain how it happens.'

'We will come to the explanation later on. Will you kindly look at this enlarged photograph of the will through the microscope? The words "niece Annie" if you please. Do you find any trace here of erasure or re-writing?'

'None whatever.'

'If they had been there when the photograph was taken the camera would have found and shown them, I presume?'

'Certainly.'

'That will do, Mr. Crosscaden.'

'Mr. Carver,' said the judge, 'I think I follow the drift of your question. But I should like to know'——

'If your lordship would pardon me for a moment, I would respectfully ask your lordship to examine this document.'

He handed up the pipe-case to the bench.

'Your lordship observes I have not opened it since I took it from the defendant's travelling-bag?'

His lordship opened the case. Inside it

was a neatly constructed mould of a large key made of flan—that brown papier-mache on which stereotypes are cast.

'In the name of wonder what is this?' cried his lordship, holding it out for the inspection of the jury.

'We hope to prove it is a mould, my lord,' Mr. Carver answered quietly, 'a mould of the key of the safe in which the will was kept in Riversdale. With your lordship's permission I shall not trouble the court or the jury with any lengthened speech. This young lady'—he indicated Dora with a gesture—'Miss Dora Myrl, the lady detective of whom your lordship may have heard, was in Riversdale when the defendant in this case arrived after his uncle's death. She surprised the defendant, as she believed, in the act of casting a duplicate of the key of the safe which was missing at the time. He thrust the mould into his bag so violently that it burst through the lining of his bag, where fortunately it was allowed to remain. Suspecting some attempt to tamper with the will, she poured ground glass into the ink-bottle which she thought it likely he would use. The photograph of the will was taken by her just after the will was read, and, as I venture to

submit, before this most ingenious fraud was perpetrated by the defendant, who remained in the house a week afterwards with a duplicate key of the safe in his possession. I shall now, with your lordship's permission, offer the court rebutting evidence in the case. The first witness I call is the defendant himself.'

There was a pause.

'Call the defendant!' said the judge.

'Sir Albert Evans Lovel!' yelled the crier.

No response.

'Sir Albert Evans Lovel!' louder than before.

'My lord,' the junior counsel for the plaintiff said, 'I saw the defendant leave the court a moment ago through the side door when the evidence about the photograph was taken.'

'Call him outside!' said the judge sternly.

'Sir Albert Evans Lovel' was shouted at the door.

Still no response.

The judge turned to the leading counsel for the plaintiff.

'Mr. Carver,' he said, 'I do not think we need trouble you further in the case. What say you, gentlemen of the jury?'

'We are unanimous, my lord,' replied the foreman. 'We find in favour of the will.'

X

HIDE AND SEEK

It was a vision made real; conceived in the heart of the poet; created by the patient genius of the artist. It captured, not the eye merely, but the soul of all who gazed on it. 'Life and Love' he called his work, and it justified the name. On the right of the great picture a stream came coursing down from the misty hill-tops, widening and deepening as it came, till in the centre foreground it flowed a broad clear river 'of balmy liquor crystalline hue' through overhanging and interlacing trees. Wild birds fluttered through branches, and wild flowers bloomed on the banks. Down the centre of the softly flowing stream, dappled in light and shade, a boat came gliding with a maiden and her lover. Their eyes were on each other, and the light of love was on their faces. They were alone—they two—in the beautiful world where love was everything, and the gold of the

sunshine and the ripple of the waters and the gleam of the flowers and the songs of the wild birds were the vague accessories of their delicious dream. The eyes of the lovers could not see where the river, issuing from the pleasant wood, flowed in rougher channels and swifter current down into the mist-covered ocean.

Assuredly Godfrey Morland had at last achieved his triumph. It had come to him after long waiting and much labour. Here was a picture to capture the eyes of the critics and the heart of humanity. It was large and bold, for his genius loved a wide canvas, but withal it was painted with the patient fidelity of a miniature even to the tint on the petal of the primrose and the gleam on the wing of the goldfinch. So close was the scene and so real that the branches seemed to hang out into clear air, and one was tempted to lean forward and dip a lazy hand in the flow of the limpid water. The heart ached with vague longings at the calm loveliness of the scene.

Three years ago the artist had sat before a wide vacant canvas and dreamed it all, and behold, after three years of patient labour, his vision took form and light and beauty, and was

visible to the eyes of the world. When his artist friends praised his picture—more by their eyes than by their lips—or when he stood alone in his vacant studio gazing almost reverently on his masterpiece as a thing distinct from himself, his heart rejoiced with the triumph of artistic creation that brings men nearest to God.

But success meant more even than artistic triumph for the young painter. It meant human love and happiness as well. The face of the maiden in the picture with the roseleaf cheeks and eyes of forget-me-not blue was no ideal beauty. Alice Lyle, who had loved him when the world frowned, was now to share his triumphs.

No petty rivalries marred the full and rounded harmony of his happiness. His comrades all rejoiced with him in his triumph, and Ernest Beauchamp, his chief and dearest friend, was most hearty of all in his rejoicing.

Yet here, perhaps, if anywhere, a little twinge of jealousy might fairly have been pardoned. For Ernest and Godfrey were brother artists and had worked together, and Ernest had easily eclipsed his friend at first.

His work was of that light and graceful school, with a touch of sardonic humour, that

appealed to the fashionable world. His reputation was quickly made.

But now, with this picture that appealed straight to the human heart, Godfrey had outdistanced him for ever.

Nor was Ernest less his rival in love than in art. It was he who had first found Alice Lyle amid the roses of a country rectory, and he had wooed her in his own sportive fashion—half jest, half earnest—till Godfrey came and saw and won.

But still his sunny temper seemed unruffled. He was loudest in his praise of the great picture, and he insisted that he should be his friend's best man at the approaching marriage.

'Alice must have a last chance,' he said jestingly, 'should she resume her good taste and good sense even at the critical moment before the altar, I'll be there and ready.'

The picture, which still stood in the artist's studio, soon grew to be the common talk of the artistic world of London. The dealers flocked to the place as miners to a newly discovered gold country. Foremost amongst them all came the king of picture dealers, Jacob Goldmirk. A staid looking man, though his life was full of excitement and adventure. He had dis-

covered miracles in reputed daubs. He had bought old masters for old songs in every corner of Europe, and made the fortunes of a score of picture painters while he had made his own bigger than all the rest combined.

Godfrey had refused all offers for his masterpiece till after the exhibition; in his heart he loathed the thought of parting with it. But Goldmirk had purchased a battle-piece which Godfrey had painted just before. It was a fine bold canvas, just a shade smaller than the last, and full of life and power. The subject—the Charge of the Irish Brigade at Fontenoy—had hurt the susceptibilities of the British public, and so the picture had hung unsold. But now Goldmirk had purchased it for a fair price. 'A fashionable painter, my dear fellow,' he said, 'may paint just what he likes, and it is sure to sell. You'll be the fashion presently.'

They had a little supper in the studio to celebrate the purchase—just three, Ernest Beauchamp, Jacob Goldmirk, and Godfrey. They sat late without lamps till the white light of the full moon stole in through the broad window, and found here and there bits of colour and life and beauty on the pictures round the walls.

Mr. Goldmirk bubbled over with good

humour like the champagne he sipped so freely. But Ernest Beauchamp was in a meditative mood, and looked out silently through the open window, bathing his soul, as he said, in the moonlight. The room grew chilly, and Goldmirk at last called to him to shut the window and fasten it, like a good chap. Godfrey added, 'I don't want burglars after the picture.'

The words have a certain importance in view of what followed.

Next morning, after breakfast, Godfrey started for the country. He was under promise to bring Alice to afternoon tea, and give her a last look at the masterpiece before it went to be framed.

He left at eleven. About half-past twelve Mr. Goldmirk called to see him, and was told he had gone to the country.

'I'll wait for him,' he said, 'in the studio.'

He threw off his light overcoat, planted a chair opposite his purchased battle-piece, planted himself astride on it, lit a huge cigar, and was left smoking.

He was smoking still, but had drawn a fat picture catalogue from his pocket, and was noting the prices with a stump of lead pencil

when Godfrey and Alice came into the studio two hours later.

Goldmirk started from his seat and turned his round good-humoured face half over his shoulder.

'Halloa! Godfrey,' he cried, 'so you have sent the masterpiece to be framed already. Beg pardon! didn't see you had a lady with you. How do you do, Miss Lyle?'

But Godfrey Morland did not hear the last words, for one quick glance told him that the easel at the far end of the room was vacant.

His picture was gone!

'My God! it has been stolen,' he gasped out. He turned pale as a ghost, and Alice clung trembling to his arm. But the shrewd picture dealer kept his wits about him.

'Nonsense! man,' he said, 'don't look so frightened, Miss Lyle. One cannot steal a big picture like that as easily as a postage stamp. It may have been shoved somewhere out of the way. Let us have a look around!'

The honest confidence in his face and voice were as a cordial to Godfrey. They all three made a search of the room. But their hopes quickly evaporated. The picture was nowhere to be found. They found, indeed, the large wooden frame on which the canvas had been

stretched lying against the wall without any attempt at concealment. The picture had not been cut, but stripped from the frame by drawing the tacks that held it. Not a particle of the canvas remained. Lying on the floor close to the window were a claw-headed hammer, a turnscrew, and a sharp scissors. The meaning of the hammer was plain enough, but the scissors puzzled them at first.

Godfrey startled the others by a sudden cry as he came to the window. The fastening was undone. He threw up the sash and found a knotted rope hanging from the iron work of the balcony into the street. There was a running noose on the rope, and apparently it had been flung up from the street until it had caught over the spiked heads of the railing of the balcony. The method, at least, of the robbery now seemed plain enough. But who was the thief?

A moment afterwards Alice made a still more startling discovery. It was a large handsome mother-of-pearl button which Godfrey instantly recognised as a button from the brown velvet studio jacket of his friend Ernest Beauchamp.

He took it from Alice's hand gingerly, as if it burned his fingers.

'I don't believe a word of it,' he cried vehemently, answering the unspoken accusation in his own mind.

'Don't believe what?' said Goldmirk, coming up to him. 'Oh!'

He looked suspiciously at the button which Godfrey held in the palm of his hand, and which he instantly recognised.

'What is that?' asked Alice.

'Only a button from Mr. Beauchamp's jacket,' Goldmirk said.

'Oh! no, he didn't do it; he couldn't do it!' she cried.

'We'll soon know,' added Godfrey, and he sat down to his writing table and scribbled a note.

'What are you writing?' Goldmirk asked cautiously.

'A note telling Ernest the picture has been stolen.'

'Do you think it safe to—warn him?'

'Perfectly. I'd pledge my life he'll come. But I'll write a line to Scotland Yard at the same time.'

'One moment before you stand up,' said Alice, glancing over his shoulder; 'there is a very clever woman—a lady detective, Miss

Dora Myrl. I have heard wonderful stories about her. You might ask her to come.'

Godfrey wrote a third note, Alice directed it, and all three were dispatched with the servant.

'Take a hansom, John!' Godfrey said, 'and lose no time.'

While John was away, yet another discovery was made, this time by Miss Lyle. In the bottom of an old cupboard she found a pile of scraps and strips of canvas, cut small with a sharp scissors, and smeared here and there with paint.

For a moment Godfrey was chilled with the thought that his great picture had been cut to pieces. But a second glance told him that the pile was not a twentieth part of the bulk of the canvas of the picture, and the fragments were let lie without more notice where they were found.

Ernest Beauchamp was the first to arrive, pale and wild-eyed with excitement.

'Stolen!' he cried excitedly, 'impossible! Why, it was here while we were at supper last night. Who was in the studio since then?'

Mr. Goldmirk turned on him angrily. 'I was,' he said, 'for two hours. I came about

twelve, and I was here when Godfrey returned at two. I never left the place for a moment; the servant can prove that.'

'Who talks of proving?' cried Ernest; 'no one suspects that you stole the picture.'

'But someone stole it,' said Goldmirk doggedly.

'Why! what do you mean?'

For answer Goldmirk pointed to the button lying on the table.

'That was found on the studio floor,' he said.

Ernest started and turned pale at the sight.

'Mine!' he gasped out.

'The window was open, there was a rope hanging from the balcony,' Goldmirk went on remorselessly.

'You don't believe this, Godfrey? You don't believe this, Alice?' Ernest cried indignantly, with a catch as of a sudden sob in his voice.

Before either could reply Inspector Worral from Scotland Yard appeared on the scene. He shook hands with Mr. Goldmirk, whom he knew—Mr. Goldmirk knew everybody—and bowed to the others.

'Now, if you please,' said the inspector briskly, 'we'll go to business.'

With methodical precision he picked up the clues. Mr. Goldmirk, who kept his wits about him, briefly detailed the facts of the supper the night before, his own visit to the studio that day, and the disappearance of the picture, setting out in order the various discoveries they had made. He forgot to mention the finding of the scraps of canvas, which no one regarded as important.

The inspector, with the button in his hand, stood at the open window and examined the fastening.

'It is plain it could not be opened from the outside,' he said; then, after a pause, 'was it opened last night?'

Then the remembrance of Ernest's 'bath of moonlight' for the first time came back to Godfrey. He made no reply.

But Ernest Beauchamp himself interposed: 'I was at the window,' he said, 'but what of that? I closed and fastened it when I came away. Surely you must remember that, Godfrey? You remember, Goldmirk?'

'I remember Godfrey told you to fasten it,' said Goldmirk slowly.

The inspector shuffled on his feet and coughed an embarrassed little cough. 'I hope it will come all right,' he said at last, 'I do indeed. But as things stand it is my duty to arrest Mr. Beauchamp on the charge of felony.'

He laid his hand on the young painter's shoulder. 'You are not bound to say anything,' he began, relapsing into the monotonous drone of the customary formula, 'but anything you do say may be used '——

'I beg your pardon for one moment, Inspector,' interrupted a clear musical voice from the further end of the room, and a dainty little lady stepped clear of the pictures. She was dressed in a neat tailor-made costume of some dark tartan softened by a nestling lace frill instead of a hard man's collar at the throat. She wore a sailor hat with a gay ribbon and feather; the face she turned to the inspector was full of mocking good humour.

'Miss Myrl!' he cried. The inspector's voice was civil, almost deferential. All the same, he did not seem to be too well pleased at her sudden appearance.

'Precisely!' she answered pleasantly, 'I'm a bit late, I'm afraid. Your man caught me at

home.' She singled out Godfrey at a glance. 'But I had two urgent letters to write first, so I came over after him on my bicycle. You were all so busy you did not hear me come in, and as you were going over the case with my good friend Inspector Worral I thought it would be rude to interrupt, so I waited, using my own ears and eyes in the meantime.'

'And you think, Miss Myrl?' the inspector began hesitatingly.

'Haven't quite made up my mind yet. Must have a look round for myself.' She just glanced at the hammer and scissors and turn-screw that were lying on the table together. The button she took in her hand for the fraction of a second. She leant out over the balcony and examined the rope. All was done rapidly, with the alert grace of a bird. There was something bird-like, too, in the rapid glance which she cast round the room.

Straight to the fireplace she went, looking into the ashes, and fished out a few charred fragments of paint-stained canvas. These she examined with such care that Alice was tempted to say timidly: 'I found a lot of

other pieces just like those in the bottom of that cupboard.'

'Ah!' said Dora sharply, 'I heard nothing of that before.'

She seemed excited for the first time as she rummaged amongst the little pile of canvas scraps which Alice showed her, and finally bundled them all out on the floor of the studio, and set to work fitting them together. Under her deft fingers they began rapidly to assume a regular shape. Presently Alice went down on her knees, too, and helped her without a word, while the four men watched silently. The canvas scraps seemed to have been deliberately hacked to pieces. But the girls' quick eyes and fingers found and fitted the edges and angles, as you fit a puzzle map. Gradually the pieces took the shape of a large picture frame about three inches deep, spread out on the studio floor, with two slight gaps in it where the bits of canvas had been half burned.

Dora leaped up from her work, her eyes bright with triumph.

'Well?' asked Inspector Worral jestingly, 'have you found the picture?'

'Yes,' she answered with a smile, 'I have found the picture!'

They looked round the vacant studio in blank amazement.

'Wait just one moment!' she said, 'let us dispose of those things first. This hammer and turnscrew and scissors,' she said to the inspector, 'can you suggest why the thief should leave them after him if he got away with the picture itself?'

'You mean when he got away, I suppose, Miss Myrl?'

'I said "if," Inspector, but it really does not matter. Now look at the rope. You see the knot at the noose is quite soft. If a man had gone up and down that rope the knot would be as hard as a nut.'

'Then you really think'—— the inspector began, when she cut him short again.

'We are just coming to that. Oh! the button is the next on the list. You'll appreciate the point,' turning to Alice with a smile. 'You see this button has been cut off, not dropped off. The threads are still packed tight in the holes. It was not likely, was it, Inspector, that Mr. Beauchamp would cut off his own buttons for the purpose of shedding them about his friend's studio from which a picture was stolen?

'Now I come to the canvas. We are getting "hot," Inspector, as the children say in their little games. You will notice that somebody besides myself thought those bits of canvas of importance. There was a vain attempt to burn them before they were hidden in that cupboard. Will you kindly examine that canvas frame, Mr. Morland, and tell me is it not about the size of the canvas of the missing picture; remember I have never seen the picture, though I hope soon to have that pleasure. The outside of the frame seems to me exactly the same size. And the inside? Come, it's not fair to mystify you any further. Will someone kindly hand me that turnscrew and hammer? They must do duty for the second time to-day.'

With the tools in her hands she walked across to the big battle-piece which Mr. Goldmirk had purchased; sat on Mr. Goldmirk's chair in front of it, and, before they guessed what she was at, loosened the tacks and took off the canvas. The stolen picture showed beneath neatly stretched on the framework, its edges clipped to make it fit unseen.

'Why!' cried Morland in sudden inspira-

tion, 'this was Goldmirk's picture; it was to be sent home to-morrow, and mine would have gone with it. Then it was Goldmirk who'——
He looked round, but Mr. Goldmirk had—to borrow a parliamentary phrase—'walked out.'

XI

WEIGHED AND FOUND WANTING

'It's really an extraordinary story, Miss Myrl. But I suppose you are quite surfeited with marvels?'

'Don't suppose anything of the kind, Dr. Stewart. Remember "increase of appetite doth grow with what it feeds on." I'm always hungry for excitement.'

'But your whole life is made up of strange stories!'

'Many of my stories have no end to them.'

'Why, I thought there was always a happy ending; that you never failed?'

'Don't think nonsense then, much less talk it. Of course I fail often, but I don't publish my failures. It's only my successes that are worth talking about. But you are evading the real question, Dr. Stewart; what is this wonderful story of yours?'

'There's a bad puzzle-headed ending to my story.'

'That doesn't matter; besides, I can see you are just longing to tell it. I believe you have come here for the express purpose of telling it!'

'You have found me out,' he said, laughing a little, but all the same abashed at the girl's shrewdness, 'there is no use playing diplomacy with you. Just give me another cup of tea, and you shall have my story as far as it has got, for I do trust the end is not yet. I don't know, Miss Myrl, if you ever happened to hear of Major-General Sir Anthony Collingswood?'

'Of course. I met him the night before last—a grizzled veteran of fifty, as strong and as glum as a bear.'

'Do you know his nephew Alan?'

'Yes, and like him.'

'That's all right. Well, about two months ago Alan Collingswood, who had been a chum of mine at school and college, came quite unexpectedly into my study. I thought he was in India.

'"I want you to do me a trick of your trade, old man," he said the moment after we had shaken hands.

'"An operation?" I asked.

'"Yes, I suppose you would call it an operation."

'"You are chaffing, Alan," I said, "you look as fit as a Derby favourite."

'"I'm in dead earnest," Alan answered; "look at this."

'He rolled up coat and shirt sleeve from an arm that was like a prize-fighter's, and showed me a healed scar about two or three inches long in the fleshy part of his arm.

'"Well, what's the matter with that?" I asked.

'"Feel it," he said, shortly.

'Then I'm afraid I spoke a bad word, I was so surprised. I couldn't tell what to make of it. The wound was not a bit like a gun-shot wound, yet I was almost certain I could feel the bullet bedded pretty deep in the muscles above the elbow.

'Alan nodded reassuringly. "Oh! it's there all right," he said, "and I just want you to cut it out."

'"Does it trouble you much?" I asked.

'"Not at all, but I want it out," he persisted.

'"It's a very simple job to cut it out," I

said, "but a bit painful. Will you take chloroform?"

'"Not a sniff. I'll have it out with my eyes open and my mouth shut. I had no chloroform when it was put in."

'I laughed at this as a good joke, but afterwards I found the meaning of his words.

'"When do you want the operation performed?" I inquired.

'"If you're ready now," he said, "I'm ready."

'Don't be frightened, Miss Myrl, I'm not going to inflict on you the details of a surgical operation. Alan bore it like a brick, never so much as winced when the knife cut into the flesh. I made a clean incision, and picked out the "bullet" with a forceps. He even smiled a queer sickly smile as I laid the "bullet," which struck me even at the time as a queer shape, carelessly aside, and brought the lips of the wound together to heal, as it did heal, by the "first intention." Meanwhile the "bullet" lay neglected on the table. I saw that Alan's eyes were on it, and thought he would like it as a memento of the incident. It was covered with blood, so I picked it up again in the forceps, dipped it in a bowl of tepid water, and

brought up—the most glorious diamond I had ever seen.

'"Hand it over, old man," cried Alan, laughing at my amazement.

'Then the whole story came out. Six months ago, in a remote district in India, Major-General Collingswood had the good luck to save the life of the Rajah of Ringanpore. A tiger had the Rajah on the ground, and was mouthing him as an ill-trained dog mouths a wounded partridge, when Sir Anthony walked up as cool as if he were out partridge shooting, put the muzzle of his rifle to the tiger's ear, and blew a jagged hole through its skull. Those Collingswoods are a plucky lot.'

'The Rajah was quite unusually grateful. He gave Sir Anthony a big diamond—a very big diamond—which he had dug for the purpose from a grotesque wooden idol. It proved a dangerous gift. You have read Wilkie Collins' "Moonstone," Miss Myrl?'

'Of course, I delight in it.'

'Well, it was the same thing over again. The natives tried to rob the Major-General of the diamond half a dozen times; twice he had a narrow squeak for his life.

'Now it chanced that Alan was coming back to England on leave, and he volunteered to carry the diamond home with him and sell it.

'Sir Anthony objected at first. "How do you mean to hide it, Alan?" he said.

'"That's my affair, sir," replied the other: "I promise you I'll hide it where those beggars won't find it, anyway."

'"Well, take it and take care of it," said Sir Anthony at last. "It's as much your affair as mine, or more." For it seems the price of the diamond was to go to pay off the incumbrances on a family property which Alan was to inherit.

'"I will guard it as if it were part of myself," Alan answered laughingly.

'The surgeon of the regiment was a good friend of his—no one can know him without being a great friend of his—and he persuaded the surgeon to hide the diamond where I found it. The clean cut the keen knife made was healed within a week and gave him no trouble afterwards, and the precaution saved the diamond if not his life. He was twice waylaid by the Indians on his long journey to the coast, and stripped stark—I mean he was

thoroughly searched, but nothing was found of course.

'So the diamond came with him to England, and first saw light again in my study.

'The next thing to do was to sell it. He asked my advice, for in such matters he was as innocent as a baby.

'Luckily or unluckily, as the case may be, I knew a diamond merchant named Solomons —perhaps you have heard of him?'

'I have.'

'You seem to have heard of everybody, Miss Myrl. You may also have heard that he has the reputation of being the most liberal man in the trade; pays the very highest price per carat for all classes of stones. He is a living proof, besides, that honesty is the best policy, for he's amazingly rich.

'To Solomon's Alan went by my advice. The old man weighed the stone carefully himself before us two. It was just forty-nine carats. He frankly confessed it was a brilliant of the best shape and the very purest water, and he gave Alan on the spot a cheque for 5,700*l.*, which was the outside price at the weight.

'Alan lodged the cheque to his uncle's

credit, and sent him the docket from Mr. Solomon's containing the price and weight. The letter crossed one from his uncle saying that he too had got leave, and hoped in a short time to start for England.

'So far the story has run smoothly enough. Now comes the nasty part. About a fortnight ago, without the slightest warning, Sir Anthony Collingwood, with the docket in his hand, burst into his nephew's rooms while he was at breakfast, and denounced him as a cheat and disgrace to his family and his uniform. If it had been anyone else, Alan told me, and I don't in the least doubt it, he'd have knocked him down on the spot. But his uncle had always been like a father to him. He kept his temper wonderfully, and his coolness made his uncle the more furious. Still, somehow Sir Anthony managed to bring out what he had come to say. He had himself, it seems, weighed the diamond carefully in India in the fine scales of his portable medicine chest, and found the weight to be sixty-five carats. This, as you know, Miss Myrl, is a still more serious difference in the question of value. The price of a diamond increases at least by the square of its weight, and even in the case of larger diamonds by the

cube of the weight. If Sir Anthony was right, the diamond, instead of 5,700*l.*, was worth at least 18,000*l.* or probably 20,000*l.*'

'Well, well,' said Dora, a little impatiently, 'you may assume I know a little about diamonds. Do tell me what happened next; your story is getting interesting!'

'Alan heard him out without a word, and then he rang the bell and sent a district messenger straight away for me.

'I found the two men in two easy chairs at the opposite ends of the room, glowering at each other.

'"Stewart," said Alan, "this is my uncle, Major-General Sir Anthony Collingswood."

'I bowed; Sir Anthony gave a stiff half-inch nod.

'"My uncle," Alan went on in the same even tone, keeping the brake hard down on his temper, "my uncle does me the honour to call me a cheat. It's all about the d——d diamond," he broke out suddenly. "I wish I had never touched it."

'"I wish so too, sir," growled the uncle.

'"Stewart," said Alan, pulling himself together wonderfully, "I want you to tell my uncle the whole story."

'"May I ask," said the Major-General, fixing me with a cold stare, but pointedly addressing his nephew, "who this gentleman may be —a friend of yours, I assume?"

'I was a bit riled at this, you won't wonder, Miss Myrl. But I was determined to keep my temper well in hand. I saw, of course, that there was some trouble between uncle and nephew, and hoped to settle it.

'I told Sir Anthony my name and address and position as quietly as I could.

'"He'll probably say you're lying, Stewart," said Alan bitterly; "you're the friend of a cheat, you know."

'But Sir Anthony interposed with stiff old-fashioned courtesy.

'"I beg your pardon, Dr. Stewart, if there was anything in my manner calculated to give you offence. I will most willingly hear any explanation you can give me of what certainly seems a black business."

'I plunged into the story straight away. When I told him—I tried to do it dramatically —where and how the diamond was hidden and found, I certainly made an impression. His face softened, and he glanced admiringly at

his nephew, who doggedly refused to meet his eye. But he hardened again as I went on to speak of the sale.

'"This Mr. Solomons of yours," he asked sharply, when I had ended, "has the reputation of an honest dealer?"

'"Not merely honest, but off-hand and liberal, Sir Anthony."

'"You were with my nephew when he first brought him the diamond?"

'"No, but I was with him when he sold it, and saw the stone weighed and the weight entered in a docket."

'"Ah!"

'He evidently found something—I could not tell what—in my answers for his suspicion to feed upon.

'"Can I see this Mr. Solomons?" he asked, after a short pause.

'"Certainly, I'll be most happy to take you there. But frankly, I'd like to know first what the trouble is about."

'"Haven't I told you already," Alan interposed bitterly. "I've cheated him in the sale of his infernal diamond."

'Sir Anthony grew cool as the other grew hot. He took not the least notice of his

nephew by word or look, but drew me quietly from the room.

'"Good-bye, uncle," cried Alan mockingly. Some devil had got hold of him. "You will beg my pardon yet for all this."

'With a strong effort the other still restrained himself. "I will beg your pardon, sir, if I am wrong; if I am right, I will disown you."

'We were in the street walking in the direction of Mr. Solomons when he spoke again.

'"When can you make it convenient to take me to this man—this Mr. What's-his-name—that bought the diamond?" he asked.

'"We are going there now."

'"But your appointments?"

'"My appointments must wait. This matter is urgent, and your nephew is my friend, Sir Anthony."

'There was another pause, and we walked on briskly.

'"Dr. Stewart!" he said at last very earnestly, "you must not think me a mere Indian pepper-box, a man without a liver or a heart. I have behaved badly in this business, I know. I have been brooding over it on the boat all the

way home, and my temper got the better of me just now. But I feel it is too serious a thing to get riled about." Another pause. "The truth is I have always loved my nephew as a son, and have been proud of him. I would willingly have thrown the diamond and the price of it to the devil if he could come clean out of this bad business."

'"He will," I answered confidently.

'Mr. Solomons received us very civilly. He willingly showed us the diamond, though he refused to let it out of his own hand. "You will forgive me," he said courteously, "for what may seem to savour of suspicion. But I make this an invariable rule, and where there are no exceptions there should be no offence."

'However, he weighed the stone in our presence. It was a shade under forty-nine carats, and he allowed us to test the weights and scales for ourselves.'

'Sir Anthony hardly spoke at all, going through the business quietly and stolidly. When we got out into the street he confessed that the diamond which he had seen was precisely similar in shape to the one given him by the Rajah.

'"It seemed to me smaller," I said incautiously and without reflection.

'The next instant I was sorry I said it.

'"That's my notion, too," he answered hastily and hotly; "there must have been a substitution before the weighing and the sale, and it's not easy to see how that could be managed without my nephew's connivance."

'We had another trial of the weight last week. This time Alan was present and several experts. The diamond was weighed again in our presence, and the weights and scales tested before and after, with exactly the same result. Alan was positive it was the same diamond he had got from his uncle and sold to the merchant. This time I was inclined to agree with him. I suppose I naturally thought it larger when I took it first from its strange hiding place. But unfortunately I had already committed myself on this point to his uncle, and there was no use telling him my second thoughts about the size.

'I'm tiring you, Miss Myrl, I'm a bad story-teller. But luckily there is little more to tell.

'Sir Anthony sticks to his point. His diamond, he says, unquestionably weighed sixty-five carats; this only weighs forty-nine.

It cannot be the same; there must be trickery somewhere. The fierce old boy completely broke down at Alan's place last night, and with tears in his eyes urged his nephew to confess, promising him forgiveness. But Alan ordered him out of his room.

'That's how things look at present; they could not well look uglier. The two men are all the more angry because they are so fond of each other, and because each in his own way is as proud as Lucifer!'

Dora Myrl did not seem to hear him. She sat for full five minutes after he stopped speaking, with puckered forehead and lips tight-closed.

'What do you think?' she said at last abruptly.

'I'd pledge my life on Alan's honour!'

'That does not carry us very far.'

'I can go no further. Can you?'

'Well, yes,' she answered, smiling, with a lighting up of her whole face, 'I think I can; I'm almost sure I can. But I must put my notion to the test. Can you arrange a final interview with Mr. Solomons?'

'I think so, but he is naturally a bit crusty about the business.'

The interview was arranged for the next day but one. The doctor reported to Dora he had no trouble with Mr. Solomons. Sir Anthony was eager to come, but Alan was as obstinate and sulky as a pig. 'I'd much sooner,' he said, 'that he'd put me in the dock straight away and have done with it.' At last, however, he also consented.

They found Mr. Solomons in a spacious office on the ground floor at the back of his premises in Hatton Garden. A very broad, massive mahogany counter, highly polished, divided the room longitudinally into two sections. In the outer section, which was thickly carpeted, there were tables and chairs. Behind the mahogany counter, facing his visitors, sat Mr. Solomons on a high stool, with a scales and a powerful magnifying glass in front of him. There was a large safe at his right hand, and a small American roll-top writing desk and a bookcase near the wall.

Mr. Solomons was a handsome and venerable looking man, about seventy years of age, with a flowing white beard and bushy white eyebrows, from whose shade his large dark eyes looked mildly out upon a wicked world.

His manner was a little cold to the party,

but still courteous. He pushed the scales and weights across the counter without a word, to be examined and tested.

The scales were a most delicate piece of mechanism. The dishes were polished steel attached to the arms by fine gold wire, and the beam played on a diamond pivot. So perfect was the poise that a hair dropped in one scale brought it down with a tap on the table. The scales and weights were carefully tested with others brought for the purpose, and were then handed back to Mr. Solomons. He unlocked the safe, took out the diamond, and put it in one dish of the scales. Slowly, one after the other, he put the weights into the other. At forty-nine carats the dish with the diamond slowly rose, and the weighted dish came down with a tap on the counter.

As she stood there with her pretty crook-handled parasol resting on the mahogany counter right in front of the scales Dora Myrl looked a gay Society butterfly—nothing more. She was daintily dressed in a green water silk dress with an elaborate trimming of shiny beads of steel and jet, and a wonderful toque, with a bright red feather in it, perched amid her glossy wavy hair.

Dr. Stewart noticed that she seemed to take no interest at all in the testing of the scales and weights, and very little in the weighing. Even now she stood close to the counter, plucking carelessly at the tassels of the bead trimming of her dress. A bunch of the beads came away loose in her fingers, and, leaning forward, she set them on the glossy counter close to the scales just as the weighed dish came slowly down. The jet beads rested where they were laid. But the tiny steel beads rolled rapidly away across the counter, and disappeared under the rounded edge of the weighted scale.

So quietly was the thing done, and apparently so carelessly, that no one noticed but Mr. Solomons. As the steel beads vanished under the scales, Dora raised her bright keen eyes and looked meaningly in his. His face changed instantly to a ghastly pallor, and his trembling hands fell limply from the scales.

With a quick jerk of the crooked handle of her parasol she brought it, weights, diamond, and all together, across the counter.

Mr. Solomons neither spoke nor moved.

'Now weigh the diamond again!' said Dora sharply.

They weighed it at the table with the same weights and scales—it was sixty-five carats full!

For a moment they looked from one to the other, dumb with surprise. Dr. Stewart spoke first.

'I cannot understand,' he began.

Dora pointed to the little speck of white steel beads now clustered close together on the dark glossy surface of the mahogany.

'A powerful magnet,' she said, 'has been let into the wood from below; the mahogany is only skin deep over it.'

Sir Anthony did not give a second look or thought to the diamond. He turned to his nephew.

'Alan,' he said simply, 'I beg your pardon.'

'Don't mention it, sir,' said Alan, and the two men gripped hands.

XII

THE WINGS OF A BIRD

'Is it true?' Dora asked, as they swung round to the languishing swell of the music as lightly as though they floated upon air.

In plain prose, they both waltzed well and their steps suited.

'Is what true?' Fairleigh asked.

'Oh! you know, you know; don't palter with me, sir. I'm dying of curiosity. There now! the music has stopped. It's a judgment on you for your duplicity. No! I won't dance any more; I want to talk. Hide me away somewhere from protesting partners, for my card is full!'

'I'll be delighted at the chance; will the conservatory do?'

Many eyes followed them as they walked slowly across the ballroom, for both were celebrities in their way. Ernest Fairleigh had

been the Senior Wrangler in Cambridge the year that Dora had taken her degree. He was the chief boast of the university at the time. Dora had naturally worshipped with the rest.

Fairleigh—like the Admirable Crichton—was what is called 'a good all-round man,' pre-eminent on the cricket ground and the river, as in the Examination Hall. Nature with unwonted generosity had given him at the same time a clear brain, an honest heart, an active liver, and a well-constructed body to hold all three. His work and his play were the very best of their kind. At the university, like Bacon, he had at first made all knowledge his province. But of late, and especially since he had left the university, he had concentrated himself on applied mathematics and mechanics, and on these subjects his supremacy was universally confessed. Strange stories were buzzed about London as to the inventions he had made or was about to make.

It was hard to look at the man and to believe these stories. For Fairleigh was not a bit like the conventional type of the distinguished sage scientist—no spectacles, no snuff, no nothing.

'Fine young fellow!' would be the every-

day man's comment on the square-shouldered, straight-backed, deep-chested figure. 'Nice looking, too!' the lady commentator would add, for he had a silky moustache and beard, and eyes of turquoise blue, and crisp fair curls that framed a forehead, too wide, perhaps, for beauty, not for brains.

Only three little lines parallel down the centre of that forehead—wide and square—told how hard the brain had been worked.

It chanced that he had not met Dora since their college days together, but he recognised her at once, and insisted on monopolising all the spare dances on her programme till she gave up dancing for talk.

'It's just as easy to be good-natured as nasty,' she said, as she made room for him on a snug little couch in a quiet corner of the great palm-house. 'Besides, I know you are longing to unbosom, and I'm as secret as the grave. Do talk!'

'My dear Miss Myrl, out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh, and my heart is'——

'Bar lovemaking, please, at least for the present, and talk shop!'

'Impossible in such a place and in such

company. Do you think Father Abraham talked shop—agricultural and pastoral shop would be in his line—when the angel visited him?'

'Meaning I'm an angel. All right, then; talk of my wings.'

'So you have heard?'

'All London has heard something. I want definite information. In plain English, have you discovered the secret of flying?'

'No!'

She looked disappointed.

'My dear Miss Myrl,' he went on, smiling at her disappointment, 'the secret of flying has been known since the dawn of creation. Taking the insects in with the birds, half the living things on or over the earth know and practise the art.'

'But have you made it possible for men and women to fly? You know right well what I mean!'

'Honestly, then, I believe I have; I may say I'm quite sure I have. It has been my dream since I was a boy'—all trace of levity was gone from his voice and manner. 'I thought it a disgrace to our boasted lordship of creation that the stupidest bird and the meanest

insect that flies could do well what we could not do at all. With millions of models daily before our eyes and six thousand years, more or less, to solve the problem, we had ignominiously failed. It was this ambition that made me take to mathematics and mechanics at the university. After I left the University I went in hard for anatomy. Then I looked up all that had been heretofore done in any direction in the art of flying, and then, just a year ago, I began on my own work at last. Am I boring you, Miss Myrl? Set a man on his hobby, you know, and he'll ride to the —— I beg your pardon!'

'Go on! go on! I never in my life was so interested.'

'An inventor,' he went on, 'will generally tell you that he found the other fellows had been all wrong. I found they had been all right; I got valuable hints from all of them. The balloonist, the wingist, and the aeroplainist —if I may coin two awkward words—were each about a third right. But the bird was after all my headmaster.

'It has been accepted as an aeronaut's axiom that a man's muscles are not strong enough to flap wings big enough to raise him in the air. That's true and it is not true.

Some comparatively heavy birds—the grouse and the pheasant and the pigeon, for example—fly very fast with very short wings. So I set myself to consider the comparative strength of the man's muscles and the bird's, and I made this interesting discovery. As an almost invariable rule in proportion to their respective bulk, the man's muscles are stronger than the bird's. In proportion to their respective weight the bird's muscles are stronger than the man's.

'The first thing, therefore, was to diminish the man's weight—to speak accurately, to reduce his specific gravity to the bird's, or below it—I really am ashamed of myself, Miss Myrl,' he broke off again. 'But you have to blame yourself for the nuisance. This is not the kind of talk for a drawing-room and with such bewitching music entreating us to dance. Do come?'

'If it were the music of the spheres I would not budge a step; please go on.'

'Where was I?'

'Getting your man into training for a trip through the air.'

'Not exactly that. You see when a man goes into training his weight is reduced, but his specific gravity is increased. A thin man

weighs less than a fat man, yet a thin man sinks in water and a fat man floats. I wanted to put on something lighter than blubber to help my man to float in the air. Here the balloonist stepped in to help me. It was no hard task to make a framework, light and strong, covered with oil silk and filled with hydrogen, which, fitted to man like a great padded overcoat, increased his bulk and diminished his weight at the same time. Then I took my next tip from the aeroplainist. My framework was curved at the back but flat in the front, and designed so as to rise against the wind and support itself steadily in the mid-air.'

'But the motive power was still needed?' Dora interposed.

'Quite right, Miss Myrl,' he said, delighted at her eager appreciation, 'and that was the hardest nut of all to crack. You see it was not a machine I wanted to make fly, but a man. Have you noticed the way it is universally assumed that a flying machine should be a war machine as a matter of course? It is a universal rule that the great science of slaughter—which they call war—almost monopolises invention. The first idea in men's minds at the news of any great discovery is, will it help to kill more

men? By that its value is tested. Nor is it merely the dull men or the sordid men that take this view. You remember how Tennyson associated flying and killing in his vision of the future:

> Heard the heavens fill with shouting and there rained a ghastly dew
> From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue.

Now please remember I wanted, if I could, to contribute to the delight, not to the misery, of mankind. I was resolved to give my man wings, and teach him how to use them for his own pleasure, not his neighbours' misery. My notion was to make him his own flying machine and his own muscles the sole motive power of his flight.'

'Are his muscles strong enough?'

'Well objected, Miss Myrl, my story provokes the question. I was just coming to that. A man is not as strong as a steam or gas engine of course, but he is an infinitely more perfect machine. Every ounce of strength he has is at his disposal in any and every direction. It can be applied to the best possible advantage. Besides, in any flying machine the man must be taken up. My idea was to send him up as a worker, not a drone. There was no

sound reason why he could not work as hard as a bird.'

'And you succeeded?'

'After many trials and many failures I succeeded. My wings are worked by a simple mechanical contrivance which I think I may call ingenious. The hands and feet can be used alternately or together. My combination man-bird can, I believe, fly with the wind or against it—against for a preference, if it is not too strong—at the rate of sixty miles an hour. In his air-proof hydrogen overcoat he will be so light that an accident is impossible.'

'Surely what you hope for is impossible too, Mr Fairleigh. I know enough of mechanics to know that when you increase the power you diminish the speed; the stronger the lever the slower the motion, and *vice versâ*.'

'That's exactly what the wise people said about cycling, Miss Myrl. You cannot put more strength, they said, than a man has into a machine. If it carries him faster than he can walk or run it must be at the cost of a greater exertion. In a word, he cannot go far if he goes fast. We know how their wisdom

worked out in practice. A man is able to do twenty miles an hour on a bicycle for a week at a stretch in spite of the tremendous drag of the track's friction against the wheel pressed down with the combined weight of rider and machine. My man-bird, with no friction to stop him, should do sixty at the least.

'But, to be quite candid with you, Miss Myrl, it is no longer theory with me. Now I'm going to startle you! Three nights ago I, Ernest Fairleigh, flew five miles without fatigue or difficulty; time, a little over a quarter of an hour.'

She was bewildered, almost frightened, at those last few quiet words. Up to that the conversation had interested her rather as an impersonal lecture on popular science by a man admitted to be a master of his craft. But she could not realise in the least that the greatest problem of the centuries had been solved at last. It was surely enough to make her gasp for breath to be told, in quiet matter of fact tones which made doubt impossible, that this good-looking young fellow in conventional evening dress had done what all men had dreamed of and no man in the world's history had accomplished before.

She sat for a moment in silence, striving to

grasp the full wonder of it, while the waves of music from the drawing-room came and went. The man beside her suddenly assumed an almost God-like dignity in her eyes. When she spoke at last, it was not in the least what she meant to say, neither words nor voice seemed her own.

'Have you patented the invention, Mr. Fairleigh?'

The question seemed to her awakened fancy a pitiful anti-climax. But plainly Ernest Fairleigh did not think so.

'Not yet,' he said slowly. 'Honestly, Miss Myrl, I have had some worry about this part of the business and meant to consult you, even if you had not forced the running. I have heard of your triumphs. I am anxious to have the thing absolutely complete before I send the plans to the Patent Office, and it is not absolutely complete even yet, though I hope a few days more will complete it. You see I don't want to give the hint before I am quite ready, and to have other fellows crowding in with patent improvements.

'Now comes a strange part of the business! I kept my secret—or thought I kept it. I never even spoke of the subject except to

yourself to-night, and to one other very intimate friend. Yet, as you know, the rumour of my work has got abroad about the city. Even that is not the worst of it by any means. During the last fortnight there have been three separate attempts to burgle my papers. The last was most ingenious and almost successful. My confidential clerk—who has helped me with the clerical work and calculations from the first—has had enormous bribes offered him to copy or steal the papers ; bribes that in two instances have run to four figures. He couldn't have done it if he wanted, and wouldn't if he could. The old fellow—who is as honest as the sun—came straight with the letters to me.'

'Forewarned is forearmed,' said Dora ; 'you have taken precautions of course?'

'Every precaution that I could think of. I have had my offices changed to a top story in the very heart of the city. I work in the front room, and Bradley in the back. There are iron bars on the door and on the windows which look down into the thronged street, and a couple of policemen have special instructions to keep a sharp eye on the place. The papers are kept in a special safe of my own devising

—absolutely burglar proof, I believe—and I alone keep the key. Except the complete specification and tracing on which I am now working, a single sheet of thin paper, no document of any importance ever leaves the safe, and the specification goes back every night from my own hand. Every morning I open the door of the office with a patent Chubb key, and lock it every evening. No one leaves the place meantime. Both Bradley and myself take our luncheons with us to the office. We are both armed and ready to use our weapons. There does not seem much chance for a thief—does there?'

Dora had lapsed into a brown study and looked at him silently without seeing him. Manlike, Fairleigh mistook intentness for inattention.

'You are not listening, Miss Myrl?' he said in a hurt tone.

'Both with my ears and mind,' she answered, 'listening and thinking my very best. I am not easily excited. But you have set all my nerves tingling. The thing itself is of such transcendent importance.'

'Is there any other precaution you could suggest?' he asked anxiously.

'None, unless'—— She hesitated for a word.

'Unless what?' he urged.

'You could not, I suppose, finish the work alone?'

'Not easily. Oh! I see what you are thinking of—Bradley. You may put that out of your mind, Miss Myrl, you really may,' he went on earnestly. 'If you knew Bradley as I do the thought could never have occurred to you. I don't urge the fact that he has refused the immense bribes that have been offered to him. The man himself is incapable of treachery, especially to me. He has been in my father's service or mine over thirty years. A gentle, placid, innocent old bachelor. He lives in a little detached cottage fifteen miles out of London that I have taken for him. In his spare hours he is absorbed in his garden and poultry yard—especially his poultry yard. His cocks and hens and pigeons take prizes at the poultry shows. I know something about human nature, I flatter myself, and you may safely leave Bradley out of the calculation of danger.'

'Then I have nothing to suggest; you seem to be absolutely secure.'

'It is a relief, believe me, to hear you say

so. Listen! they are playing the last waltz, Miss Myrl. Can you resist its persuasion?'

She could not resist.

Two days later, as Dora sat at her desk late in the afternoon, her servant hurriedly put a note into her hand.

She tore the envelope open and read: 'Come at once if you can. Please come. Ernest Fairleigh.'

Not a word more.

'Note came in a hansom, Miss,' the servant explained in reply to her look of enquiry, 'hansom is waiting.'

The hansom had not long to wait. The instant she stepped in, the driver was off without waiting for a direction at a twelve miles an hour trot citywards.

There were three people in the office which Dora reached up interminable stairs, and all three looked about equally disconcerted and bewildered. Two she knew, Fairleigh and Adam Warner, an inspector from Scotland Yard. The third—a gentle-faced, middle-aged man, round shouldered and grey haired, with the large dark wistful eyes of a spaniel—she divined at once to be the confidential clerk Joe Bradley.

'Gone!' was Fairleigh's brief greeting as she stepped briskly into the office. She was not in the least put out by his abruptness.

'Tell me the facts,' she answered, 'as shortly as you can.'

The inspector began: 'Mr. Fairleigh came in this morning at the usual hour'——

Dora interrupted: 'You won't mind, I'm sure, Inspector, you and I are too good friends to fall out about trifles; but I want the evidence at first hand.'

Fairleigh nodded. 'About three o'clock I was working at the paper I told you about, Miss Myrl. I had almost finished a complete tracing of the design when a sharp knock came to the door. "Come in!" I cried, but there was no answer. I went myself to open the door. There was a man I knew on the landing—a man named Jerome, an inventor. He wanted my opinion on a point in a design he was working at. He was in a great hurry, he said, and wouldn't come in, and I didn't press him much, for my precious papers were all about. I showed him what he wanted, drawing the design with a stump of pencil on the back of an envelope, and he thanked me and left.

'I was about five minutes altogether on the landing, standing with my back to my own door, not more than a foot or two from it. But when I went back I saw at a glance that the specification at which I had been working was gone. My first thought was for Bradley; that he had been hurt, perhaps killed. The door between our two offices was closed. I turned the handle and found him busy at his desk. He had heard nothing and had seen nothing of course. We made a diligent search, but it was no use. Then Bradley suggested a detective, and I telephoned to Scotland Yard, and Inspector Warner was kind enough to come over at once. He too has made a most thorough and searching examination; all to no purpose. I must confess, Miss Myrl, that my old friend Bradley'—he laid his hand kindly on the old clerk's shoulder as he spoke—'embarrassed me not a little. He insisted on being stripped and searched. I told him not to make an ass of himself. But the inspector joined with him "for the man's own sake," so of course I had to give in. The inspector certainly searched him as if he expected to find something. But it was nonsense of course, as I knew.

'Then all of a sudden your name came to my mind. The inspector jumped at the idea'—Dora smiled very prettily on the inspector—'and I took the liberty of sending the note and a hansom for you, and—that's all!'

He stopped short, a little out of breath with his rapid narrative. Then he added: 'If you will pardon me, I think you may begin with the assumption that the paper is gone out of the place. If it were here it could not have escaped our search. The inspector will agree with me in that?' The inspector nodded.

'I don't in the least doubt that,' Dora answered, with restless eyes all about the room. 'This paper won't be found here—that would be too simple.'

'That means it is irrevocably lost, I'm afraid?' Fairleigh said, dismally.

'Don't be too sure of that. I've got a notion; it is only a fancy yet; still'——

She had picked up the empty silver sandwich case which had carried his luncheon and fiddled carelessly with it. Then, without another word, she put it down, walked abruptly to the door of the inner office, turned the handle, and went in: the three bewildered men following her. She pounced at once on a neat

covered basket that lay open on the floor beside the desk.

'Bradley's luncheon basket,' Fairleigh explained, as she picked it up. She examined it carefully, with brightening eyes and colour.

'You have searched this basket, of course?' she said to the inspector.

'Of course.'

'And found?'

'Nothing.'

'Just so; nothing. It's a large basket for a luncheon, isn't it? You have a good appetite, Mr. Bradley?' speaking for the first time to the old clerk, with her keen eyes upon his face.

'Pretty good, miss, thank you!' the man answered meekly, 'but I don't eat the full of that, not nearly.'

'No, I suppose not. You are a vegetarian I find; you eat—oats?'

She fished up a grain of oats out of a crevice of the wicker-work and held it out before him.

Plainly a small thing could confuse the modest old man. He certainly coloured and gasped at the sight of the poor little grain of oats in the small palm of her hand.

Perhaps she wished to relieve his embarrassment.

'Oh! I beg your pardon, Mr. Bradley,' she said sweetly, 'I see now I was mistaken. You had cold chicken for lunch, of course.'

She drew a small bluish feather from the basket as she spoke. 'A chicken of your own rearing, I presume. But you really ought to get them to pick the fowl more carefully, Mr. Bradley!'

It was strange and almost pitiable to note how pale the old man grew under the girl's keen eyes. He mumbled something with trembling lips—no word was audible.

Dora affected to examine the little feather still more carefully with a quizzical smile.

'Again I beg your pardon, Mr. Bradley,' she said, 'I find it was a pigeon pie you had for luncheon. This is a pigeon's feather I have found in the basket.'

Without a word the man dropped into a chair, and lay there huddled up with his face buried in his hands.

'What is the meaning of all this, Miss Myrl?' Ernest Fairleigh broke out at last, in utter bewilderment.

'Only this, Mr. Fairleigh; I've discovered

the thief and the paper. If you will kindly take the train at once to the peaceful rural retreat of the innocent Mr. Bradley, you will find the paper you want hid under the wing of a little innocent carrier pigeon in his dove-cot.'

So he did.

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